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KRISHNA IN INDRAPRASTHA

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Dr. Dipak Chandra

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KRISHNA IN INDRAPRASTHA

DR. DIPAK CHANDRA

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POINT OF VIEW

Krishna is the central character of the Mahābharata, the pivot round which all the political activities and the battle constituting the major part of the epic evolve. Krishna is not only a crutial factor but also controls the course of events. Everything happens because of his will. The epic would lose its brilliance without him.

He possesses admirable qualities of the best politician, he is cool-headed, well-mannered, charming. He has political sagacity and foresight. He understands the human mind and knows how to win and influence people. All these qualities have won him universal respect and admiration. Later his extraordinary power of intelligence and skill were magnified till they acquired a supernatural aura.

In the early Mahabharata, however, Krishna is not a god but a perfect human being, a wise leader who constantly works for common good and is always on the side of truth and justice. This character of flesh and blood was later turned into a god by generations of fond admirers. This transition from the human to the divine was an entirely man-made process. Through Krishna the divine spirit manifests itself – this became the theme of countless later day poems and devotional literature.

This Krishna is a good friend of the Pandav brothers. Their well-being is his prime priority, it is he who decides their war strategy. The five brothers provide the motivation, the actual action emanates from Krishna. The Pandavs exist only to implement his will – they reflect his will – they do not have any independent existence.

Krishna appears in many ancient tales and mythologies of which the Mahabharata is the oldest. A good part of this epic in its present form is a departure from history and embellished by imagination. Needless to say I have no intention to explore the historical truth of the epic. My purpose has been to present Krishna in his political role and action as contained in the epic. I have been fascinated by this character and have made an attempt to understand him. So this book is my interpretation of the political career of a great man.

Incidentally the epic does not give us any information of how and where Krishna was born and absolutely nothing about his childhood. We have the first glimpse of him in the court of King Drupad as a spectator in the Swayamvara ceremony of princess

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Drupadi. I have also begun my narrative from that point since that was where he had his first encounter with the Pandavs – the chief protagonists of the narrative. In my novel I have tried to follow in a realistic manner the course of events through which Krishna attempted to reinstate the exiled princes.

Naturally I had to be selective. From the extensive background I have concentrated only on activities having some kind of political significance. Some blanks had to be filled by imagination. Some questions invariably come to mind as we read the epic but the poet has avoided them lest they might expose the feet of clay and hurt the sentiments of the readers. But in my novel I acted from no such compulsion. I have also tried to steer clear of the hundreds of fantastic tales and myths woven into the story from all parts of the country. Perhaps this wili seem offensive to the people to whom the epic is a sacred text.

I have tried to assess this unusual character from a different and obviously modern angle. My attempt has been to analyse the unique personality in a rational way. The world has seen many political leaders with the uncanny quality of keeping the masses under a spell. Krishna had this power in a far greater degree.

In a way the epic is still very much a part of us. The power game in India and the world to-day remind us of the time of Krishna, of the same balance of power and battle of nerves. This analysis may therefore, act as a bridge between the past and the present.

Dr. Dipak Chandra

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR :

Dr. Dipak Chandra (born 1938) has introduced a new genre of fiction in Bengali. By drawing his characters and incidents from the great epic Mahabharata and analysing them in a rational manner he has given a new interpretation to many age-old narratives. Recent researches in mythology and ancient history have questioned many of our conventional assumptions about the epics and the scriptures. Dr. Chandra is aware of this trend and equipped with a modern sensibility and secular outlook has attempted to give a new twist to the epic narratives. They are not merely tales from the epic in a modern idiom, but a drastic departure in his mode of treatment and assessment.

Dr. Chandra is a lecturer by profession. His doctoral thesis was on the concept of modernity and social consciousness in Bengali Drama between 1923 – 1960. His first published book (1970) was on the life and work of the novelist Manoj Basu. Since then he has written 20 novels.

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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR :

Enakshi Chatterjee (born 1934) is a bi-lingual writer, translator and media critic. She translates from Bengali to English and vice versa. She has translated a wide range of Bengali fiction including works by Tarasankar, Premendra Mitra, Ramapada Choudhury, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Moti Nandy and Syed Mustafa Siraj. She has also written on popular science, science fiction and biography of scientists. *Paramanu Jijnasa* written jointly with her husband Dr. Santimay Chatterjee won her the *Rabindra Puroskar*.

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ENGLISH SPELLING OF NAMES USED :

Andhaka
Arjun
Aswatthama

Balaram
Baranabata
Bhargav
Bhim
Bhisma
Bosudav

Chitrangada

Dhoumya
Dhritarastra
Draupadi
Dron
Drupad
Duhsasan
Duryodhan
Dwaraka

Ghatotkach

Hidimba

Jarasandha

Kamsa
Ksatriya
Kaurav
Kuruksetra

Moydanab

Pandav
Pravas

Rajasuya Yajna

Sakuni
Salya
Satvat
Satyabhama
Shalva
Sisupal
Subhadra

Ulipi

Vabhru
Vidur
Virat
Vrishi
Vyasdev

Yadav
Yajna
Yudhisthir

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CHAPTER ONE

The occasion was memorable—it was the marriage of a princess —no less a princess than Draupadi. Krishna, the chief of the Vrisni clan along with other Yadav chiefs was one of the special invitees in King Drupad's court where Draupadi was about to choose her husband. With Krishna was Balaram and also the chiefs of Bhoja, Andhaka and Satvat clans. Seats were allotted to guests, Krishna took his seat with other Yadav heads of state. There were other kings as well. Some seats were reserved for Brahmins, sages and saints. Behind these were rows for the uninvited Brahmins and the general public. Seated among the Brahmins were the five Pandav brothers in disguise watching the display of Panchal wealth. The princes and members of royal families who came contending for the hand of Draupadi sat in the centre platform, casting envious glances to others. Each was so boastful of his lineage, youth, beauty and affluence that they held everybody else in open contempt. Envy shone from their sparkling eyes.

Curious spectators thronged the court, people coming not only from the towns but from far flung villages. Their laughter and murmur of conversation rang through the ground. To the east of the court stood a marble platform. This was the spot where the fortunate man would be chosen by the princess.

Under the colourful canopy, decked with flags and garlands the sweet smell of incense and joss sticks wafted in the breeze. Then there was music—the low vibrant sound of the drums, the sweet tinkle of the veena mixed with the rhythmic beats of the mridanga which activated the dancers. The music filled the hall, casting a spell over the audience. Then the dancing girls stood in a semi-circle, greeting the guests. When all were seated they began the dance of Shiva and Parvati.

None of this could hold the attention of Krishna. He was intently looking at the entrance, impatiently. He looked around, scanned the assembly for a familiar face. But his long search came to nothing. Disappointed, he gave up the search. Though his frustration however was not noticed by anyone, but inwardly he was quite upset.

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Meanwhile the star of the ceremony, the princess Draupadi made her appearance. Attired in red, decked in precious jewels, sandalwood paste smeared on her forehead she walked demurely. She had a garland in her hand—the garland which was soon to adorn the neck of her chosen mate. All music stopped. The murmur of conversation came to a halt. The family priest uttered the sacred invocations for well-being. When he finished, the lady was asked to step forward.

Dhristadyumna, the brother brought the bashful Draupadi up to the platform—the spot where the ritual was to take place. Instantly the musicians struck up their respective instruments. A murmur of appreciation rose like the buzzing of drowsy bees. The shrill note of conch shells drowned their combined chatter. Then Drupad, the king of Panchala raised his hand indicating the conch sound and all other music to be stopped.

The dark beauty of Draupadi, her peerless perfection, her magnetic attraction captivated the assembled royalty. Like bees attracted towards honeyed flowers their eyes grew restive, sharp pangs of desire ran through their limbs. The greedy looks embarassed the princess, she blushed, her heart beat faster. However she did not forget her manners. She joined her hands in a polite greeting though her eyes were still downcast.

She was introduced to the noblemen by her brother Dhristadyumna. This was followed by an explanation of the rules. "Your imperial majesties", said Dhristadyumna in a booming voice, "You can see a bow with five arrows on the platform. You have to pick up the bow and aim at your target through the moving wheel right on the top. You are allowed to make five attempts. The person who is able to do this will get my beautiful sister as his wife."

Commotion ensued. Even the spectators grew excited. Everybody started speaking at the same time. Some were pleased with the test—comments were made on the suitability of the method. But a few found the method unfair. Some doubted the honesty of the whole arrangement. The competing kings all began to dream of the exquisite princess. Vanity and pride prompted them to feel as though the prize was already won. It was just a matter of minutes they felt.

But Krishna was becoming apprehensive. The sight of the assembled royalty ready for action increased his nervousness. Even the king of Panchal looked worried though he did not say anything. He too was expecting the third Pandav. For a long time he had been wanting Arjun to be his son-in-law. This specially made bow, the

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revolving wheel through which the aim was to be taken were all intended for the ace-archer Arjun. For others it was almost impossible to hit the target. Krishna could guess the King's intentions. But Drupad knew that his secret was safe with Krishna. His only worry now was the absence of the brave prince. He was not to be found among the princes and men of noble birth assembled here. Drupads scanned the entire crowd—but no, Arjun was nowhere to be seen. He was utterly disappointed. Krishna too shared his concern.

Only Krishna was aware of the peculiar predicament of the king. He felt equally perturbed. As time went on his uneasiness grew, and all hope seemed to recede. He had a special reason to bring all the Yadav chiefs to witness the ceremony. But if Arjun failed to appear, his entire purpose would be defeated.

If the five Pandavs had not been killed in the Jatugriha fire—they would have been here. This was not only his guess but a tactical calculation as well. It all went back to the day, Draupadi had emerged from the sacrificial fire. Arjun would win her—the astrologers had predicted. And she was to cause a great battle. What has been the decree of fate cannot be wiped out. Krishna was bewildered as events were not following a pre-destined pattern.

It was linked with his favourite dream of unification. Those who spoke of integration felt it would be easier to unite the various Bharat kingdoms under the Pandav banner. Vyasdev was one of them. Krishna too shared that dream of building up an unified land of Bharat. This could only be done if the Pandav brothers took the initiative. Now it seemed that the dream would remain a dream—the vision of making a new heaven and a new earth. He needed idealists, straightforward honest men like the Pandavs to drive away injustice, misery and exploitation from the face of the earth. They themselves were stripped of all their possessions, subjected to the gravest of injustice. They were best qualified to come to the aid of the poor. They would be able to assist him in the work of rebuilding the country once they were in power. The task was challenging to say the least. Only the combined strength of Arjun's courage, Bhim's vigour and Yudhisthir's honesty could bring this about. Everything depended on Arjun's presence on this occasion. All the plans would collapse if he failed to turn up, and Krishna was justifiably worried.

He scanned the entire assembly of kings as far as his eyes could reach. Not one seemed to look the least bit like Arjun. What can this mean? For a fleeting second Krishna was afraid. The terrible scene

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of the Jatugriha massacre rose before his eyes—the charred bodies, the burnt skeletons and he seethed with anger and hatred to those responsible for the barbaric act.

Yudhisthir and his brothers could not even think of the trick played on them by their uncle Dhritarastra. They were like his sons —so without hesitation they went to Barnabata little knowing that they were being sent to their death. A request from uncle was to be obeyed—so unsuspecting, so trusting was their respect for him. Soon news came of the death of the whole family including the mother Kunti. They were burnt to death in that house of lac. But Krishna refused to be taken in. There had to be a catch somewhere. People as truthful and virtuous as the Pandavs could never meet such a gruesome end. This firm belief kept him going. He was positive that in this court of Dhrupada he was going to meet them.

He was looking forward to greet them as friends. Though now obliged to roam about in the forest like beggers the Pandavs were nevertheless born in a royal family. In sheer bravery few could equal them in the country. Krishna would feel honoured to have such strong and brave people as his friends. Their friendship would be an asset. He would even be happier to have bonds of kinship. None of his, clan yet knew of his secret plans. They would be told at the appropirate time. The time was not yet ripe.

Astrologer's predictions can never go wrong. The idea of their death was brushed aside. They must be here, at least Arjun, in disguise. With his political wisdom Arjun must realise how important his presence was—it was important that he should compete for the hands of Draupadi.

Right now they were without their kingdom, living a life of poverty. They had neither money nor resources. Winning Draupadi in the open contest would be to their political advantage. At one stroke it would bring honour and prestige. Kinship with king Drupad will extend their sphere of influence. It would be easier for them to come out in the open, casting off their disguise. Help from this quarter would strengthen them further in their struggle to win back the lost territory. This double advantage would be a turning point in their life. The political gains to be obtained from this alliance were too great to be ignored. Would the Pandavs let this chance slip through their hands? Krishna wondered.

Suddenly his heart missed a beat as he looked at the rows of uninvited Brahmins at the rear. A sense of relief flooded his whole

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being. At first he could not believe what he saw. Then he looked again to make sure. So all worries came to an end at last. The entire assembly took on a more charming look in his eyes.

He whispered to Balaram. "The five Pandavs are here, dressed as Brahmins. You just wait and see the fun." Balaram sitting next to him stared uncomprehendingly.

One by one the contending kings went up to aim. The bow itself proved to be too heavy for some. A few of those who managed to lift it collapsed when it came to the tying of the bow string. They sweated and struggled in vain then went back to their seats glum faced and crestfallen. Their gestures were so comic then Draupadi could not help smile. She bit her lovely lips to control her amusement.

Sisupal, Jarasandha, Salya—all brave ksatriyas well-known for their might came up to try. All went back sweating. Then the greatest of the great, brave Karna, moved by the sad plight of his fellow kings marched forward. With effortless ease he lifted the mighty bow, pulled the string and got ready to release the first arrow. Draupadi was taken completely aback. This was not what she wanted. She had her social status and heritage to think of. Besides she had already accepted Arjun as her husband. He was her father's choice. And Karna was just about to displace him. No, she could never let this happen. She was terribly upset. None but Arjun was going to win her—in fact the test was designed in such a manner that nobody else except Arjun could qualify. The idea of Karna as a serious contender did not cross their mind. Not even Krishna could think of this. True, Karna was the king of Anga which qualified him to participate. But he was not of royal birth. This was most unfair—how could a princess marry a man of humble origin. Draupadi, always a rebel was determined to thwart the efforts of this man who was intently looking at the target. The arrow would go off any minute now.

All eyes were on Karna. Everybody watched his movements in silence, including Krishna for whom it was an intensely dramatic moment. At the same time he felt helpless. Pretty soon Karna would hit the target and Draupadi would be his. Arjun would be deprived of the prize which destiny had chosen for him. Restlessly Krishna fidgeted in his seat. He wanted to do something to distract Karna but checked himself with effort. That would be bad manners for an invited guest. Destiny will triumph, it had to—he told himself and glanced at Draupadi for some signal to act.

Draupadi, in desperation looked at her brother, but he was watch-

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ing Karna intently. She had to act now, she overcame her hesitation and spoke up in a voice trembling with emotion, "Gentlemen, pleaso listen, I cannot accept someone from unknown origin as my husband. I beg you to forgive me."

Her words created a sensation. It's effect on Karna was electric. He shuddered. Lifting his sad eyes towards the princess he put back the bow and the arrow and slowly went back to his seat hurt and defeated.

A hush fell. The silence was so total that one could hear the drop of a needle. After the discomfiture of Karna no other king dared to come forward. Then from among the Brahmins one man stood up. He was Arjun, dressed as a Brahmin. Step by step he proceeded towards the platform from where he was to take aim.

So at long last one of them was taking up the challenge! This excited the Brahmins present. They cheered him lustily. Some wished him well, but others apprehending his failure looked sad. How could a poor Brahmin reach for the stars! This made some angry and they jeered and ridiculed Arjun. Some reacted sharply to the taunts and arguments ensued. It was a noisy scene with shouts and counter-shouts going on in full swing.

But Arjun was unperturbed. Unaffected by such uproar he proceeded to the platform in slow but assured steps. In his black robe Arjun was looking so handsome that neither Balaram nor Krishna could take their eyes off him. It was as though a god had appeared before them in a virile, well-formed body.

Arjun however, was in no hurry. He stood very still before the platform trying to concentrate, bring all his energy to act. He circled the platform seven times, then paid homage to the gods before picking up the mighty bow which he did quite effortlessly. Conversations died down. Everybody watched in silence. Arjun strung the bow and released the arrows—one after the other. All of them hit the target, which fell to the ground with a crash.

All the Brahmins threw up their hands and began to jump up and down including the detractors who were quite vocal even a moment earlier. Flowers were showered, conch shells were sounded. All the musicians began to play in honour of the winner.

The eyes of Krishna sparkled—this was exactly as he had expected. Draupadi was beyond herself. With passion surging within she looked on with admiration at the poor Brahmin, the dark young man. As she gazed she also felt apprehensive. She could not speak

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but her eyes were eloquent. With the natural admiration of a woman towards a hero she put her garland around his neck. It signified acceptance. King Drupad put the hands of his daughter on those of the victor. He said, "Bravo, my son. You rightly deserve my daughter. Please oblige me by taking her as your wife."

Then the proper ceremony was done complete with all the rituals done by Brahmins to give Draupadi to her husband.

The king was however beset with doubts. Who was this young Brahmin? Did anybody know about his family? From where did he come? Where was he from? Would Draupadi, used as she is to a life of luxury be able to adjust in the household of a poor Brahmin? Wouldn't she find it difficult? The father's heart was heavy thinking of the misfortune of his loving daughter. But then, nobody but Arjun could hit the target. Nobody but Arjun could string the mighty bow. So it had to be Arjun. Yet in his heart of hearts he could not reconcile the two unlikely persons.

While he was thus weighing the pros and cons there was pandemonium in the assembly. Enraged and frustrated the aspirants rushed to Draupad brandishing their swords. How dare he allow a non-ksatriya to participate in the contest which was an exclusive privilege of the warrior caste? And on the top of that, allow a poor Brahmin to win the princess! It was the highest insult to the entire Ksatriya community and the slight was deliberate. The Brahmin after all was not so much to blame. But Drupad has the entire responsibility and he had to pay a price for it.

The kings and princes who had come with the high hopes of winning the beautiful princess were now out for the blood of the king who had the audacity to humiliate them in public. They exploded with anger. Seeing the wild display of arms all the spectators ran for dear life. Even the invited guests thought it was safer to leave. It was Drupad versus all the rest for all the Ksatriya kings combined to teach him a lesson.

Drupad, cornered, did not know what to do. He asked the Brahmins to help him. But before any assault could actually take place, in rushed a young man of ample proportions, dressed like a Brahmin. He was none other than Bhim. In a matter of seconds he uprooted the trees which adorned the garden and swinging them over his head charged the unruly guests. Arjun joined him. For some time the agitating suitors were taken completely off their guard. Bhim had the situation in complete control. His war dance was so

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unexpected that it drew a surprised smile even from Arjun. Then he too plunged into the battle in real ernest. Within the batting in an eye-lid he had forced them to discard their arms. He broke their swords, tore the bow string, battered the falchions (battle-axes). Brave warriors like Karna, Salya, Bhagadutta and the rest were shorn of their pride.

Drupad watched the entire spectacle with unabashed admiration. The manner in which the two brothers took care of the frustrated royal suitors left no doubt in his mind about their true identity. He had never witnessed such an unequal contest. A moment ago he was worried about the poverty of his son-in-law. But now it was as clear as day. The two brave young men who saved his life were the most famous of the Pandav brothers. And his son-in-law was the great third brother, Arjun himself—the person he wanted so much to have as his daughter's husband.

It was also a revelation to Draupadi. The attack which began and ended in a flash was so spectacular that no ordinary warrior was capable of it. They had to be the Pandavs. She saw Arjun in the guise of a Brahmin in a new light. The more she watched him, the greater grew her admiration. So she was at last able to choose the right mate, the bravest of the brave. Indeed she was lucky. She uttered the name of Arjun—it sounded like nectar to her ears. She went on whispering his name. She wished she could go on doing it for ever.

Perhaps Krishna was the happiest of the lot. He had been in the look out for a fearless fighter just like this young man. Of course he was aware of the might of the Pandavs and the price they were obliged to pay for their courage. Now after many ups and downs they were back on the political scene of the country. And what a dramatic emergence. Delighted Krishna welcomed them with all his heart.

He remembered the time when news had come of the burning of the palace at Barnabata along with all the brothers. It was all planned by Duryodhan. Triggered by envy he wanted the Pandavs to be murdered in a way which would look like an accident. If they were to die in a fire nobody would be able to pin the blame on him. He employed a clever craftsman to build a palace with lac and other inflammable material. Like all other well-wishers of the five brothers, Krishna had also rushed to the spot when he heard of the accident. The charred bodies though burnt beyond recognition left no doubt in

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anybody's mind. The first suspicion lurked when he found the wise Vidur not mourning for the dead. Now at long last he was convinced. So the Pandavs were alive. It took a great weight off his mind. God had other plans for them. They must live to complete the job which they were destined to accomplish. Now Krishna was one step forward in executing his own plan. Kunti was his aunt—so Pandavs were his cousins. How he wanted to throw his arms round them! But those were difficult times, one had to be cautious. Their identity should not be divulged yet. With great effort Krishna kept his emotions in check.

The extraordinary feat raised doubt in the minds of the Kaurav chiefs as well. Karna, Salya, Duryodhan were all curious of the identity of the two men who could not be ordinary Brahmins by any stretch of the imagination; who then was the swashbuckling stranger of such ample proportions who could unroot trees with effortless ease? Was it merely the divine power of a Brahmin? It seemed highly unlikely for any ordinary man to have produced such a volley of arrows within the fraction of a second. It was like magic. From where did they get the strength to deter the best of warriors? No, it was impossible for any common fighter. Perhaps a god from the heavens had come down to take away Draupadi. They were sceptical and suspicious. Before plunging into action it was imperative to know who these mysterious Brahmins really were! The web of illusion, of magic had to be dispelled first. They were not to be outdone by any supernatural agent. The frustrated candidates seething in fury and humiliation charged ahead when Krishna stepped forward. He raised both his hands in order to pacify the hostile members of the royalty. He made an appeal to their sanity.

"I appeal to the mighty warriors and kings present here", Krishna said, "can't you see that Draupadi has been won by this Brahmin. By all laws of ethics and morality she now is his rightful wife. All of you are well versed in laws of morality. Why then do you indulge in such a senseless fight and bloodshed which will not lead to any good? It is an utterly useless act. I cannot imagine wise people like you falling a prey to unreasonable passion. Besides, it is an unequal fight —it does not become you. What do you expect to gain from it except being guilty of violating the norms of Dharma. You will only earn a bad name. So, I beseech all of you to accept the fact that Draupadi is now wedded to this Brahmin. It would be best for all concerned if you all return to your own states. Let there be peace."

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The words of Krishna did not fail to create the desired impression. The hostile kings were ashamed of their conduct. Krishna's arguments made them realise their own folly. Somewhat relieved that an ugly scuffle was averted they apologised and left for their respective domains.

The five brothers also took their leave. As they left for the house of Bhargav Krishna kept staring at the way they had gone, an enigmatic smile lit up his face.

He thought of Kunti—his father's sister—proud mother of five brave boys. Where was she now, away from the luxuries of the royal household? What miserable fate for such a noble lady! He wished he could see her now, re-establish the old ties. The five brothers were not even aware of this relationship—it was a strange irony of fate. But the time had come to pick up the bonds, in fact it was becoming absolutely essential in the present circumstances.

His heart went out to the unfortunate Pandavs in their present predicament—roaming about homeless, friendless. Yet they have everything—kingdom, wealth, kins—but they did not have any right over them. Poor Pandavs—this was the time when they needed a sincere friend most. Krishna, sorry to see the princes now wandering about homeless and penniless wished to come forward to help them. They needed help. They needed a friend, who would be capable of providing them the necessary moral courage. Someone they could fall back on in time of distress. Finally when they decide to disclose their identity and stake their claim a strong friend should be by their side to back them up. They would be grateful to such an ally for ever, particularly if he was to support their claim. This friendship would have far-reaching political and diplomatic consequences. That would be great tactical victory—so everything considered Krishna decided to visit them at Bhargav's place, taking his kinsmen along.

Their days of destitution was coming to an end—Krishna told himself. Soon they were going to come out of the exile and return to their own kingdom. Even the old king Dhritarastra will not be able to refuse their just claim. But he was not likely to give up Hastinapur. Perhaps they would be asked to build a new capital, develop a new territory. For the hard-working and enterprising Pandavs that would not be any problem. But they lacked experience and could do with help from a man of experience and expertise. That was one way to earn their gratitude. Besides any king would only be too happy to

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have them on his side. Who did not know about the valour and the courage of the Pandavs! In fact it would not surprise Krishna in the least if the mighty Jarasandha offered his help to the five brave princes once it was known that they were alive. Such an alliance would be to the advantage of the wicked Magadha king—it would pave his way to becoming the emperor of the entire world. The innocent Pandavs should fail to grasp the political motivations behind his offer and would only be too happy to accept his helping hand. But Pandav power combined with Jarasandha could very well tip the power structure against the Yadav alliance. That was Jarasandha's fondest dream—to destroy the entire Yadav clan. Once the two powerful forces combine war would be inevitable and the Yadavs would be sure to lose. They could not very well depend themselves against such a powerful enemy. So Jarasandha would win in the long run. That was what troubled Krishna. He was apprehensive and worried.

Yet the fact remained that the Pandavs were in desperate need of assistance—ready to take the help from any quarter. Before anyone else came on the scene it would be better to pre-empt the effort. After all they were related by blood—in fact they were very close relations. Why can't he approach them just as a kinsman and not with any ulterior motive of establishing political influence. All he wanted was that the weaker states should come together. So let the Pandavs and Yadavs work for a common purpose—a relationship based on love, friendship and co-operation. Nobody had any inkling of what was going on in his mind. He kept his secret plans to himself.

The immediate problem was how to broach the subject to the Yadav chiefs. While he was in this state of mind Balaram came to him.

"Why do you look so depressed? What is wrong," he asked.

Krishna was waiting for such a question. So he replied, "My dear brother I am keen to meet the valient Bhim and Arjun—our two cousins. I keep thinking of the scene, how heroic they were, how courageous! I would like you to accompany me too."

The Yadav chiefs were taken off their guard. They looked at each other in dismay. Pretending not to notice their discomfiture Krishna went on, as though talking to himself. "We are proud for Arjun, our close relation, the son of our own dear aunt. We are happy for him. Aren't we all?"

This was like an open challenge. The chiefs nodded in assent.

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Some were more vocal. "Yes, of course. We certainly are proud." They declared.

"Well then," Krishna raised his voice, "May I ask you something my respected seniors of the Yadav clan? Was it not unfortunate that we did not stand by them in their darkest hour of distress—children of our dearest aunt! Is it not an irony of fate that they are no better than beggars—they who are related to us by such close bonds of kinship? They are hiding their faces like sneak thieves. What can be a greater shame. Honest idealists and truthful people they are now deprived of even the minimum requirements of a decent life. As their very own people we should have lent a helping hand. But we did nothing. Right now we should be with them. Let us make amends."

This put the Yadav chiefs in a spot. They should have thought of this before, without waiting for Krishna to have reminded them. It was gross negligence on their part—most unbecoming for people close to the Pandavs by blood. Now they realised the seriousness of the predicament, it involved the honour of the clan. Certainly something ought to be done. But what could they possibly do! The chiefs looked at each other in dismay, at a loss to decide on a course of action. At long last Balaram broke the silence. "Krishna is right." He said—"we must go and visit Kunti without delay."

This proposal was approved by all. So they climbed up their chariots and started for the home of Bhargav, to the satisfaction of Krishna who had engineered it. Little did the other Yadavs know that they were on to a great victory—that they were going to pave the way to the union of the great Pandavs and Yadavs. All this was possible because of the political foresight of Krishna.

It was around sunset when they reached the courtyard adjacent to the cottage of Bhargav. But they were not prepared for what they saw. They met with a rather unusual sight. The five brothers stood around, eyes downcast, not talking to each other. They looked utterly depressed and embarrassed. An atmosphere of quiet covered them all including Kunti who sat by the entrance. Only Draupadi did not seem to be weighed down with shame, but she was confused. She stood with her gaze fixed on Arjun.

Something seemed to have gone wrong, thought Krishna. Evidently he was quite unprepared for such a situation. It was not natural. They all seemed struck dumb by some crisis. But what could have happened within such a short time? Krishna had a nag-

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ging suspicion that perhaps Draupadi the new bride had something to do with it.

None of the Pandavs had noticed the arrival of Krishna. But Draupadi had seen them and signalled to Arjun. Arjun turned round and was surprised to find Krishna and Balaram in the court-yard. It was a stroke of good luck to have their saviour in the Swayamvara assembly again among them. He had saved them from utter disaster only a little while ago, thanks to his persuasive talk and presence of mind. It was indeed a pleasant surprise.

The sight of the unexpected visitors brought Kunti out in the courtyard. Though it had been many years, yet she recognised her two nephews. She accorded them a warm welcome. There were so many questions to be asked, Krishna and Balaram touched her feet after which Kunti asked them to step into the cottage before the amazed brothers who could not understand who the visitors were. What was their relationship to the brothers? Why were they here?

Krishna ended the suspense. "Your mother is my father's sister," He explained. "So we are your cousins. My father is Bosudev, and Balaram is my elder brother."

Now the Pandavs understood. They embraced their two cousins with ecstasy. Once the initial euphoria was over Yudhisthir asked Krishna the question which was foremost in his mind; "How did you recognise us in the first place?"

"True fire will not hide beneath ashes, nor will its power be lost." Replied Krishna looking at them with fond admiration. "I could at once spot Bhim and Arjun in the Swayamvar assembly. They stood out. Even earlier, when the five of you sat in a row of Brahmins you were easily identified. It was by the grace of god that you escaped death from the burning house of lac."

But Kunti seemed preoccupied. She was not paying attention to Krishna. Quick to notice her change of mood Krishna enquired if she was not exhausted. "Are you well?" He asked. "You seem to be worried about something."

This nephew was gifted with an uncanny insight since childhood. Kunti knew that it was impossible to hide anything from him. He can read minds. She could not contain herself any longer and broke down. Then after some time she recounted her problem.

"On their return my sons light-heartedly asked me to come and have a look at what they had brought. Without looking at them I said very casually—All right, share your spoil. Now Arjun wants

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all the other brothers to marry his wife, because the mother's words are to be obeyed. Please do something Krishna so that Draupadi is saved from the sinful act of polygamy and I am also absolved from the sin of an unfair action."

For a few moments Krishna was too stunned to speak. In his eventful life he has never confronted such a case of truthfulness and honesty. Now he was in the role of a judge—he will have to take a decision. Krishna was not prepared for it. The suddenness of it took his breath away.

Other instances came to his mind. Why, Kunti herself had accepted four men without a trace of scandal. Why should her daughter-in-law be accused of polygamy? After all loyalty to love —that is what matters. A woman who is sincere in her love can never be called a fallen woman. Kunti was waiting for an answer, but Krishna could not bring himself to express what was going on in his mind.

Perhaps it was one of the lessons the Pandavs were destined to learn. The gods had sent them to earth precisely for this reason—to learn from the wonderful book of life. God took away their royal identity and drove them to the streets where they became one with the millions, had a taste of misfortune and misery. These were valuable lessons to be learnt. The Pandavs thus lost not only their kingdom, they also lost their status, their position of honour in the caste hierarchy. All this was intended to arouse sympathy for the downtrodden. It was as though God had a special role for them—They had a particular political mission. The present predicament was one of the many hurdles—a new crisis, another hard lesson to be learnt. This time it came in the shape of Draupadi.

Perhaps it was also symbolic in a way. What was a king after all but a representative of divine will. He cannot claim anything as his own. He was merely a custodian of the property of his subjects. The sharing of Draupadi was perhaps only a pointer to the greater truth that selfishness was the worst of crimes. When the people watch the five brothers having one wife it would be an example of trust and co-operation. It would teach the people that all good things are for sharing.

Krishna was surprised at the turn of events. This seemed to be a reflection of his own plan—the political plan in which he wanted to involve the Pandavs. He looked at Kunti who was waiting with bated breath for a reply.

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Krishna's lips twisted in an enigmatic smile. When he spoke it sounded like an oracle from heaven. "There is no reason to be upset my dear aunt. We are all instruments of god, we act as he wants us to act. The consequences of all our actions are also directed to him. If it is his will that Draupadi should be married to all five of the Pandavs then let his will be done. It would be morally right."

Kunti uttered a cry of surprise. "But what are you saying Krishna! One woman having five husbands! How is it possible?"

But then, Kunti had her own secret. She did not want to persue the subject further. Before Krishna's all-knowing gaze she felt exposed and her words stopped half-way. Krishna understood. He smiled without meaning any disrespect or amusement. It was a smile tinged with sadness.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Swayamvara over, all the royal guests left for their respective kingdoms—all except Krishna who was asked by the Panchal king to stay on till the wedding. So he was obliged to be his guest for some more time. As a matter of fact he was delighted at this offer for he was keen to get to know the Pandav brothers better. This provided him the opportunity of coming closer to them, of forming a more personal relationship. He needed the five brothers to work along with him in his effort to establish a political model based on equality, love, friendship, trust and co-operation. The Pandavs were to be the living embodiment of this dream.

Of all the brave and virtuous people he had known, none could match the five brothers. In sheer brilliance of intellect they were unparalleled. Moreover all other qualities like strength, courage and valour fused in a perfect blossoming of manhood—the more he thought about them the more he wondered. His eyes grew wistful. In their present misfortune he witnessed the misery of Bharat itself. They were as though a living reflection of the miserable state the country was in.

The entire length and breadth of the country was groaning under the strain of a burden, the vices of power-hungry and greedy monarchs – kings and rulers who were without a scruple, proud, vainglorious with no idea to serve anybody but their own interest. Their despotic rule had resulted in the miserable lot of millions of common people. They were being exploited and tortured. These helpless multitude were afraid, weak and without power. All they wanted was to carry on their daily business of life in peace. Having resigned themselves to their fate they meekly followed the orders of the kings, accepting the punishments without protest. The fact that they were afraid to speak up gradually breeded a kind of indifference. So they became utterly dependent on the whims of the king having neither the political will nor the right to do anything about it.

But the tragedy of the Pandavs was that they were victims of circumstances. In spite of their royal inheritence they roamed the

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streets like beggars. Since Dhritarastra controlled the army, the treasury and state power it was not difficult for him to deny the five brothers of what was rightfully theirs'. Driven out of the kingdom, the five princes drifted about without food, shelter or even a friend. Their survival depended on charity. In spite of everything they harboured no ill feeling to the uncle or jealousy for the Kaurav brothers. The modest princes never once complained against their fate, so saintly was their demeanour. These ill-fated princes were in a way a symbol of the entire people of Bharatvarsha. That was how they appeared to Krishna.

Krishna was amazed at their patience and quality of forgiveness. They were beautiful in the nobility of heart, Krishna had never seen any one like them.

They were friends of the down-trodden and the depressed, ready to lay down their lives for protecting the poor, as though they were their own kith and kin. The common people were able to get rid of the terrible demons, Baka and Hidimba only through the efforts of the kind Pandavs. The five brothers had earned their eternal gratitude but had not taken advantage of their allegiance in order to establish a stronger hold on them. To conquer and rule over the gullible population was very far from their minds. It spoke of a rare strength of character. The more Krishna thought of them the more his admiration grew. People of such god-like qualities were seldom born, with such disinterested love of the fellowmen, with no thought of personal gain.

Krishna wondered if it was not pre-ordained. They had been created by god to perform a noble deed. They could instinctively feel the misery and the sorrow of all exploited people with whom they felt a natural kinship. Through their power of love the five brothers were able to inspire the dumb millions, raise hope in millions of hearts. He was thrilled to think that such wonderful people were his friends! It was only with their help that his dream of bringing together different states to one united Bharat could be realised. It was too stupendous a task for him alone. Virtuous, selfless and strong —they had the right kind of leadership quality. They would be able to steer the still mass of seething humanity in the right direction. And who but Draupadi would provide the assistence they needed. They had mutually complimentary qualities—the five brave brothers and their spirited spouse.

But there was a more immediate hurdle. Drupada was reluctant

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to give his daughter away to the five Pandavs. The Pandavs—all five of them were equally determined to marry her.

To find a way out Krishna approached Vyasdev. Would such a marriage have the sanction of the scriptures? Vyas not only approved of it, he told him of the puranic story of Brahmi, the daughter of a sage who had married ten husbands at a time and also of the story of Goutami Jatila who had seven. On the strength of these instances Vyas convinced Drupad of the validity of such a marriage. He even presided over the marriage ceremoney which went off in true royal style. Everybody seemed happy, Krishna most of all.

Krishna had the deepest regard for this spirited woman—dazzling like the shooting flames coming out of the sacrificial fire. Intelligence seemed to sparkle from her being. He could almost visualise the scene — intripid Draupadi in front of the suitors — the sheer pluck of that brave girl, when she announced 'I will not marry the son of a charioteer.' It was not prompted by anybody else. As she watched Karna stringing the bow effortlessly she could see what was coming. She had to make a spot decision. When she spoke it was with such natural authority. She could hypnotise a crowd in an instant. The five brothers were indeed lucky to have her as partner. With her on their side it was possible to rule over the entire world.

Now was the time to proceed to Hastinapur—home of ancestors. But proper protocal had to be maintained. Vidur came as the especial envoy of Hastinapur. After exchange of pleasantaries he asked permission from king Drupada to allow him to take the new bride to Hastinapur. The mother of the Pandavs was to accompany her.

Yudhisthir wanted Krishna to come along. After all he was a good friend. But it was not possible for Krishna to oblige him because of political and diplomatic reasons. So he kept a diplomatic silence at first.

Actually Krishna was worried. As time went on his restlessness grew. The idea of the Yadavas having one more enemy troubled him. That was why he could not make up his mind immediately.

To make matters worse he had received the secret information that the Kauravs along with Karna and Sakuni were conspiring against the Pandavs. They were planning to bribe the ministers and high ranking officers in the court of Drupada to make them act against the interests of the Pandav brothers. Their effort was not only to deprive the five brothers of wealth and influence over the

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army, but also to turn Draupadi against them and turn brother against brother. Their evil plan also included poisoning the mind of Drupad against his sons-in-law.

The news merely amused Krishna. In desperate jealousy Duryodhan was acting like a child. He must have gone out of his mind. It just showed the depths of degradation to which he could descend. The idea to divide the Pandav brothers was a ridiculous idea to say the least. But however childish his attempt may be it deserved serious consideration for it showed that his hatred for the Pandavs still remained. It was not likely to be wiped out – thought Krishna. The envy of Duryodhan, the anger of Karna, the mischief of Sakuni, the blind love of Dhritarastra for his own sons – these were potential danger signals. Perhaps a conflict would surface soon after the return of the five brothers to stake their claim. Partly to white-wash the Jatugriha scandal and partly propelled by others the old king was forced to ask them to return—certainly not out of generosity or his own free will. Krishna apprehended a major outbreak of hostility. He would have had no reason for such concern if the old king acted with honest intention.

The flags on top of the decorated chariots which lined the main gate fluttered a proud ensign. The horses fidgeted. Sounds of auspicious blowing of conches and merry chanting of female voices came from inside the palaces. The Brahmins lustily sang hymns blessing the journey about to begin. Amidst all the laughter of women, the hustle and bustle, comings and goings Krishna stood puzzled, undecided.

The Pandavs were now without resources or power. They had neither an army nor the finance to raise one. There was hardly any friendly state to which they could turn for help – all except the kingdom of Panchal. Yet, such was the irony of fate that at one time Arjun had attacked this kingdom to offer it as a gift to his guru Dron—a blow from which Panchal was yet to recover. Duryodhan on the other hand did not lack money and resources besides having a number of allies. Under the circumstances it would not be safe to allow the five brothers to walk straight into the lair of a pack of wolves. Wise as he was, Yudhisthir must have had a sense of premonition, hence his appeal to Krishna whose presence would evidently add political weightage. That idea must have been at the back of his mind. How could Krishna not oblige him? A refusal would mean turning down a good friend. He decided that petty self-interest

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should not prevail. Even if his action led to dessertion by the Kauravs and their allies, if it made them hostile to the Yadavs, even then it was worth it. He was going to stick to the Pandavs at all cost. No price would be too heavy for that.

At long last, his mind was made up. He would accompany Yudhisthir to Hastina. The Kauravs along with their father and the rest of the clan should be made to understand that the Pandavs were backed by the huge Yadav community. The Yadav might was something to be reckoned with. Even the powerful Jarasandha could not overpower them despite his numerous assaults on Mathura. Every time he had to beat a hasty and ignominous retreat. That the sophisticated Yadav army was ready to come to Yudhisthir's help any time he needed it might put a check on Duryodhan's impertinence. He would be forced to treat the Pandavs with respect. So would Jarasandha. He would think twice before rallying round the Kaurav brothers. The tactical gain in making Jarasandha inactive was something Krishna had not thought of earlier. He was happy to reap this political advantage. So the simple fact of accompanying Yudhishtir to Hastinapur was fraught with diplomatic overtones.

He got into the chariot with the five brave brothers and sped towards Hastinapur through picturesque scenes of fields, forests and villages. But Krishna had no eyes for the scenic beauty. He stared unseeingly, engrossed in his own thoughts, which way did his duties lie – he wondered. Of course he must act for the good of the Pandavs who were not only his friends but they also needed his help. They might come to grief – he was worried about them. Suddenly he paused in his thinking and posed a question to his conscience – was he really a selfless friend? Was he, really? Pat came the answer: Yes, certainly. But he was not entirely satisfied. There must be something he was hiding even from himself. Was he embarassed to admit that he was cultivating the Pandavs for his personal gain? He was merely deceiving himself. Actually nobody in his clan had any inkling of the workings of his mind, not even Balaram. It was no use, so he had to keep everything to himself. None of them were ready to shoulder any responsibility. So he was left to do all the worrying.

The Yadavs these days were different. They were only interested in having a good time. Nobody was vigilent, nobody had the desire to look after for the affairs of the state. Krishna had no faith in their might or intelligence. Men and women alike had degenerated to an

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extent that they were in no position to repel a possible enemy attack. Krishna was apprehensive of Jarasandha – he was capable of any mischief. He was not likely to rest in peace till the death of Kamsa was avenged. It was only to escape from his wrath that Krishna had the capital shifted to Dwaraka which had a unique strategic advantage. For the time being they were saved. But Jarasandha was not one to give up so easily. He formed an alliance with all those states who did not feel kindly towards Krishna. The present Yadav kingdom was not equipped to resist that powerful political alliance. Limitless indulgence made the Yadavs weaker and weaker. Leaving all state matters to Krishna they were content to pursue enjoyment. It was not a happy state of affairs. The decline of the Vrisni and the Yadav clan upset and worried him.

The entire race was fast heading towards ruin through excess and indiscipline. But they were blissfully unaware of their predicament. Krishna felt helpless before the march towards destruction. A major disaster could strike any day—it had not happened because the outsiders did not know the inside story. But how long could this go on? What his drowning clan needed was a good strong pull from sincere friends, rulers who would come forward unflinchingly to their help. Only the rulers of newly formed states could be expected to provide this kind of selfless friendship. With this hope he had come to attend the wedding ceremony and he has achieved what he had wanted. So he should not hesitate to accept the invitation to accompany the Pandavs to Hastinapur. It was important that he should demonstrate his loyalty to them.

The flags of the royal palaces were visible now—they were approaching Hastinapur. The chariots slowed. By and by the arches decorated with mango branches and flowers came into view. On the decked platform the seniors—Bhisma, Dron, Kripa and others waited to welcome the five brothers. As the chariot pulled up the crowd cheered lustily. The noise surged like waves. Trumpets sounded, the women welcomed with music with the men joining in.

Vidur was the first to get down followed by Yudhishthir and Krishna and the other brothers, their faces glowing. The seniors came forward, smiling. It was a reunion after many years. They gazed at the dear brothers with love and longing. The five Pandavs were equally moved. After touching the feet of the elders the brothers stood back. The elders embraced them. Then there was exchange

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of pleasantaries. The assembled people waved to them, they raised their hands in greeting at first, then joined their palms respectfully.

In due time the eldest Pandav accompanied by the brothers and Krishna walked up to the assembly hall to pay their respects to the king of the Kurus who reclined on the throne in the company of his courtiers. As soon as they saw Yudhisthir, the courtiers stood up. Yudhisthir approached the king in slow, hesitant steps, wondering how the old king would receive him. However, he touched his feet reverently and stood back, his palms joined, as though he was seeking some favour.

The old king looked depressed. Obviously something was on his mind. The knowledge that Yudhisthir was before him wrought a strange transformation in him. His brows came together, eye-lashes flickered, the facial muscles tightened, he gnashed his teeth and with great effort controlled his emotions. But the quivering lips gave him away. Finally he forced himself to speak. "Son of Kunti," he said, "My dear, let me assure you at first that I have no intention of depriving you from your rightful heritage—the kingdom of your father and forefathers. After all you will take what rightfully belongs to you—why should I have any objection to that? But there are problems, my dear child. I just don't see how Duryodhan and you can live together in this prosperous city, just as one cannot visualise both the sun and the moon in the same firmament. There is bound to be conflict. Brothers will fight brothers. I wouldn't be able to stand it at this age."

He paused, giving the eldest of the Pandavs time to think it over. Meanwhile he too was preparing himself to deliver the final blow. He said at last, "My dear son, Durdhodhan does not intend to give up this beautiful city and the adjoining area—neither do I."

These were not easy words to utter. His voice grew husky and he looked exhausted. To the Pandavs this was like a bolt from the blue, particularly to Arjun and Bhim who boiled with indignation.

The old king heaved a sigh and went on sadly, 'Taking all the factors into account I have decided to hand you over the forested land of Khandavaprastha. It can be developed. Make it your home, you can build your kingdom there and live in peace. With an expert archer like Arjun and a strong man like Bhim you should have no worries about safety."

Yudhishthir was stunned. For a few moments he did not know what to say to this offer. He turned his feeble gaze first to Krishna

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and then to his brothers who were writhing in anger. Bhim and Arjun were provoked so much that they could hardly restrain themselves. Hatred distorted their faces.

When Yudhishthir spoke he was his usual well-mannered self, and his protest sounded feeble. "May I know uncle", he pleaded gently, "what have we done to deserve this? We are being sent away from the kingdom built by our forefathers to half of which we have a rightful claim. And on the top of that being asked to live in a forest! Of what use would that forest be to us?"

Bhim gnashed his teeth and blurted out, "You are blind, blind; truly blind—that is what you are. You look upon the children of Pandu as your adversaries. Ever since our childhood we have been treated as outsiders, we have had no claim to your affection. That is why you have thought up this wicked plan of pushing us to a wild terrain so that you and your children can live in peace."

Dhritarastra made no attempt to answer, which worried Krishna. Was a bigger, more heinous plan in the offing? He signalled to Arjun who was about to give their uncle a piece of his mind, to stop. Krishna quickly went over the situation. Obviously the idea was to deny the Pandavs their share otherwise this absurd offer would not be made. The old king knew perfectly well that the Pandavs would turn down such an offer. The way it was put made it abundantly clear that the old king had no other alternative in mind. If his offer was refused he would not reconsider their demand. In fact neither Duryodhan nor his father was willing to concede the tiniest spec of territory covered even by a needle point. Persuation by the elders, Bhishma, Dron and Vidur forced the old king to come down a bit but he had taken recourse to diplomacy. He was just waiting for Yudhisthir to turn down the offer. This is precisely what he wanted. The Pandavs were too innocent to see through this trick. Krishna was anxious for them.

One has to earn one's right—it was never offered to you on a platter. So however insignificant it might look one must not refuse it. This gift of contempt might pave the way for claiming their rightful share. For the present it was enough to extract the right to establish a kingdom. Let them accept the offer, however scanty because right now they were not in a position to set up a kingdom on their own. The old king being the head of state controlled the army and the treasury. So the Pandavs should not let this chance go—the chance to set up their own domain in a peaceful way. Before things

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could heat up further Krishna touched Bhim on the back. The brothers stared at Krishna, not understanding what he meant.

Krishna had a far away look. He could visualise the future as he looked at the five brothers. He saw the silent forest of Khandavprastha as a new beginning. The dense forest would also serve as their teacher. The forest was free from human greed, jealousy and deception. The towering trees presided over the forest, friends of the animals, providing them shelter and food under their outstretched boughs. This relationship was itself a training which the five brothers would acquire in the forest. In a way it would be an institution of higher learning where they would discover themselves.

Krishna requested the eldest Pandav to accept the offer. He said, "This offer has been made with your good in mind. I consider the offer very reasonable. A place already inhabited by people has danger lurking from every corner. A forest is always a better place. It is singularly free from envy, immorality and deceit. The virgin land will provide you ample opportunity to construct townships—it will be a creative pleasure. All considered I think we should agree to the proposal of his majesty. Your uncle has only your well-being in mind and it is a sound suggestion."

These words surprised and overwhelmed all the people present in the court including the old king himself. Yudhisthir always listened to the advice of their friend Krishna who had been with them through many ups and downs. They did not have a better well-wisher. Krishna was not asking them to accept the offer without good reason. So without hesitation and with happiness he accepted it.

After being granted royal permission the Pandavs set out for what was now to be their forest abode, accompanied by mother Kunti, wife Draupadi and Krishna. They reached the spot—fringed by hills and forests—an enchanting sight. The level stretches in between hills provided excellent scope for building houses. The mountain springs were a source of abundant water. The area could be reached through only one entry point—the rest were securely guarded by thick forests and mountain ranges.

Krishna and the five brothers had a preliminary survey. It was not as bad as it had seemed at first. Exploration revealed a lot of unexpected advantages—particularly strategic—the dense forests and hills provided a perfect cover. Moreover the single entry route made it easier from the point of view of security.

Within a short time areas for various castes and groups were

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marked and identified. Areas were marked for grazing and for tending cattle. Steps were taken to encourage trade and commerce. In no time Khandavaprastha came up—a new and beautiful township.

In his writing Vyas describes this city as so heavenly as to earn the title of Indraprastha—the abode of Indra of the heaven. The motes which encircled the glittering city were as deep as the blue ocean, the walls seemed to touch the clouds, the forts were impregnable, the arms deadly, the roads specious and well laid-out. In this gorgous city the towering palaces of the Pandavs provided a colourful spectacle.

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CHAPTER THREE

Whenever Krishna felt burdened with work he slipped away to Probhas, his favourite holiday resort. The bracing breeze, the beautiful beach and the clear blue of the ocean under the azure sky helped him to relax. It was a quiet and enchanting spot ideal for introspection. All his strains gone Krishna spent his days doing nothing, some times he pondered over the mysterious workings of life. Each day spent here was as refreshing as a drink of nectar—it seemed to give him a new lease of life. After a short stay here he went back to Raibataka, to work with renewed energy.

Whenever he came down to this seaside resort he brought his wife Satyabhama along who was very dear to him. She provided him the companionship he needel in his otherwise lonely existence. Her presence has a soft and soothing effect, like the moon. So naturally Krishna doted on her.

Finding Krishna on the crystal seat on the spacious balcony overlooking the sea, Satyabhama went up to him. Krishna was too absorbed in his thought to notice her. Probhas always had a magic over him. He reacted differently. Even his dear wife felt uneasy to go near him or talk. She could not help feeling neglected for the time being, but her resentment did not persist for long. There was something in his face, in his eyes which broke all her resistence. A feeling that her husband was no ordinary mortal would get hold of her and all her anger evaporate.

Startled at her touch Krishna turned and looked at her full in the face. "Really!" Satyabhama showed mock exasperation. "One can fathom the sea, but not you. It is just beyond my power to understand what goes on in your mind. I must say you are the strangest person I have ever seen."

"No my dear, that credit goes to you, god has created you a peerless, matchless creature"—responded Krishna with fond affection. His mysterious eyes danced playfully.

His compliment pleased Satyabhama, a smile lit up her lovely face. Krishna too seemed to relish her delight. He answered after a pause, "I wanted to be away from my duties and responsibilities for

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a while, to have some rest. But my worries would not leave me. We, the Yadavs are so alone with hostile elements everywhere—this keeps bothering me. In the entire stretch of north Bharat from east to west there is not a single state which is friendly to us. Yet none of the Yadav chiefs not even my elder brother Balaram are the least bit concerned. Wine and women are more important to them, more important than the state. They are blissfully unaware of the impending danger."

"But of course, dear," interrupted Satyabhama, "It is only natural that the Yadavs occupy your mind. After all they have put their entire trust in you. They know that as long as you are there they can rest in peace."

Krishna was taken aback. He took her in his arms and said dramatically, "You are the light of life my dearest. It would go out if it was not for you."

Satyabhama looked up in childlike wonder. "I don't know what you mean!"

Now it was Krishna's turn to be surprised. Laughing he retorted, "Don't you understand. I am only scared of one small thing. I don't want to see you a widow."

This did not upset his wife. Drawing him closer she purred, "No matter what you say I know you have the power to tide over all difficulties."

"Satyabhama you are very quick witted. But you do not know Jarasandha. He is the greatest enemy we have on this earth. I am afraid of him as he has powerful political allies and they have all turned against us."

Krishna stopped and his arms detached themselves from the waist of his wife. His expression changed, his eyes grew wistful. Satyabhama aware of the changing moods of her husband reluctantly withdrew. Krishna, she knew, would like to be left alone now.

Left to himself, Krishna pondered over his favourite dream—that of uniting the country for which a common political platform was needed—based on love, friendship, equality, peace, co-operation and co-existence. To translate this dream into reality he needed the brave Arjun who alone was equipped with the necessary qualities. He was not only courageous but had intellect, experience of dealing with people and a winning personality—exactly what was needed for success.

It had been a long time since they had met. A lot has happened

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during this interval. Arjun, the saviour of the poor and the helpless courted exile because he was trying to save the cattle of a Brahmin. The helpless owner had nobody else to turn to. But adventure loving Arjun was not likely to spend the twelve years of exile in the forest. He set out on a cross country trek, covering the east, the south and finally his steps turned to the shores of the western sea to Sourashtra. The information had already reached Krishna. That was why he was here in Probhas—to receive the third Pandav.

Krishna had extracted a good deal of advantage from the Swayamvara of Draupadi. But he was not entirely satisfied, considering the increasing political complications. The alliance between Yadavs and the Pandavs had to be on a firmer basis for which Krishna had a plan. To make full use of the good image and popularity of the Pandavs he was thinking of forming a closer alliance. His idea was to offer his beautiful sister Subhadra to Arjun as his wife. She was not only endowed with good looks but was also an accomplished woman. In fact Arjun would be lucky to have a wife like her.

Presently Arjun arrived tired and fagged out. He was brought before Krishna by Satyabhama. The two friends exchanged a long look of surprise, then both smiled and were locked in a close embrace. After a while he offered him a seat and exchanged pleasantaries. Arjun had a lot of things to tell him but Krishna restrained him—"My dear friend, you are exhausted after your long journey. Go and have some rest. You need it badly. Then we will have all the time in the world to talk." He almost pushed Arjun away from him.

At night they shared the same bed. Arjun had so much to recollect—they seemed like dreams. He recalled how Ulupi, daughter of the Nagraj Kauraba had made love to him on the banks of the Ganges. She was so uninhibited, so loving and took such good care of him that he was not going to forget the details. A tribal woman and yet how brave, how innocent. Arjun had been thrilled. He recounted all his experiences to Krishna—their military strategy, ways of collecting information, the way they treated their prisoners, their humane behaviour—all these were so strange.

Krishna smiled to himself as he watched the sparkling eyes of his friend, charged with emotion.

Arjun went on. "Leaving Ganga I proceeded towards the hilly terrain of the east. Then I saw something which stunned me. I saw a well-formed woman dressed in the royal robes of a man storm past

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on horseback through the narrow mountain track raising a cloud of dust. I was overwhelmed—it was something I had never seen before. What a woman! What an unique creation of god—so easy moving like a warrior yet exuding delicate charm reminding one of a flower."

As the vision of the skillful rider rose before his eyes, Arjun felt too moved to go on. He stopped. Krishna was greatly amused. Wanting to tease him a little he joked—"It seems the wonderful lady has made a dent on the heart of my celebrated friend!" Realising the sarcasm of the remark Arjun turned to Krishna only to find his inquisitive gaze fixed on him. Embarassed, Arjun managed to smile. "As a matter of fact she was Chitrangada the princess of Manipur. She ruled her country dressed like a man, a prince—but what a wonderful creature! Perhaps god has not created anyone like her!"

"Oh? Is she lovelier than our Draupadi then?" Krishna was determined to carry his sarcasm till it hurt Arjun to the quick.

A little put off, Arjun went on undeterred. "Nobody could beat Chitrangada who was at once kind and stern, emotional and restrained, loving and self-effacing, dutiful and ready to be of service. None but she is her equal. I asked for her hand to the King of Manipur—Chitra Bahana. There were conditions but I accepted them, and I do not regret it. A lot of things would have remained unknown if I had not married this spirited woman. She is as adept in warfare, in administration and politics as she is in diplomacy. She is brave but also a good housekeeper. Draupadi may be a good lover but Chitrangada is a friend—a companion in the truest sense".

Krishna did a quick mental calculation. The sons of Ulupi and Chitrangada would inherit the states of Manipur and the Naga kingdom which meant extending their spheres of influence in the east without warfare. The more he thought of the wise moves of Arjun the happier he felt.

Actually Arjun's travels through the length and breadth of Bharat was only a pretence. His idea was to acquire friends—to raise support for the Pandavs. And he did exactly what he had intended—create friendship and strike alliance with everybody—people of all caste and races. It was a wonderful tactical gain—of which the enemy was blissfully unaware.

Knowing that Duryodhan's intentions were far from friendly, Arjun was apprehensive. He knew a large scale conflict was inevitable in the near future. Keeping this in mind he chalked out his

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strategy. Most of the kings of Aryabarta who were allies of Jarasandha could not very well be friendly towards the new state of the Pandavs. For the non-aligned it was dangerous to go against the powerful Jarasandha faction. Arjun's targets were the eastern and south-western states, to acquaint them of the expansionist policy of the kings of Aryabarta and the political equation. And he was largely successful in convincing them. Thus the Pandavs were able to reach out beyond the boundaries of Aryabarta and establish their influence. After all force was not the only weapon—one could conquer through love and friendship. This was a new political ideal which Arjun put to good use. Bond of friendship worked differently—they did not subjugate but created spheres of influence. The new code was not to exploit the vanquished but to treat them as equals—to have cultural exchange, strike other forms of alliance, in short Arjun added a human dimension to politics. He was thus successful in bringing people closer. Krishna was proud of him. It seemed to him that Arjun was out to implement his idea of one Bharat and has just returned after finishing the first phase, the first lap of victory so to say.

The political fall-out was unexpected, but it gratified Krishna to find in Arjun the pragmatism of a mature politician—indeed he was to be congratulated for this.

Arjun went on recounting all his experiences. But he was tired and soon dozed off. But Krishna was wide awake. As he looked at the bare handsome body of his friend a hundred thoughts crowded into his mind. Would it not be wonderful to have him as a brother-in-law? It seemed he saw a reflection of his sisters innocent face on the sleeping countenance of Arjun. Though a passing vision nevertheless it had him mystified. Perhaps it was God's will, but there would be hurdles—quite a lot of them.

The most important obstacle was the fact that Arjun was not very well-known to the Yadavs. To most of them the five Pandav brothers were poor forest dwellers—naturally they were not held in high esteem. Their royal identity was not known outside Indraprastha. On the other hand the Vrisnis were a proud race. This pride would certainly stand in the way of the marriage he was planning between Arjun and Subhadra. None of the Yadav chiefs were likely to approve this union—Krishna was positive about that. In spite of all the odds against it Krishna had a feeling that fate was already active in bringing this impossible union about and that it was going to happen soon.

Krishna persuaded the Yadav states to organise a reception

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for Arjun. It was done in great style in Dwaraka. Of course it was to be a surprise. The idea was to create a good impression as well as to make the Yadavs curious about the brave hero. The feeling that he was not an ordinary human being would generate awe and respect and open their hearts to him even before a kinship was formed. This would be followed by the religious festival of Raivataka. In the free and open atmosphere of the festival Arjuna would have an opportunity to get to know Subhadra and feel attracted towards her. Love would triumph over all the controls imposed by authority, shatter all barriers.

After a few more days of leisure Krishna started for Dwaraka along with Arjun where a royal reception awaited the third Pandav. He was aware of it as soon as he reached the front gate of the city. The roads, the houses, the entire city was decked with colourful festoons and foliage, there were gates built along the main thoroughfares. Women lined the streets, blowing the conch, making auspicious chants, throwing flowers.

As the gilded chariot carrying Krishna and Arjun drew near the crowd broke into a lusty cheer. Slogans filled the air in praise of the hero—the echo rang like surging waves. Arjun was overwhelmed by this expression of love, the outburst of joy, the waves upon waves of people throwing their arms up in the air in ecstasy. It seemed as though they were grateful to have Arjun among them. As Arjun went through the crowd he responded with the same warmth. These people belonging to the Andhaka, Satvat, Kukur and Vrisni clans had accepted him as one of their own—it was a thrilling sensation. But all the same he was embarassed. What was all this for? He wanted to know.

Obviously Krishna could not tell him the truth. He said, "After all you are like one of us. They are celebrating your home coming. It is a spontaneous expression of their joy."

"But it sounds more like greeting a hero after he returns victorious. I have not conquered any kingdom, so why the special treatment?"

Krishna smiled indulgently. When he spoke it was as though he was talking to himself. "Well if you are worried about that let me tell you something. You have conquered a large part of the country not by bloodshed and loss of people but by the power of love. You have travelled to many parts, charmed them with your winning manners, formed lasting friendship even made alliances with your

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great family. Single handed you have achieved what numerous battles would not have done. I think this is a greater victory. No wonder my people are happy. They are celebrating your success."

Arjun was too overwhelmed to speak, he merely looked, his eyes wide with wonder.

Krishna was now eager to proceed to Raivatak, the site of the gala festival. All the people were thronging the streets, the wayside bars were brimming with men and women drinking and merry-making. There were chariots and other vehicles jostling with the pedastrians. A particularly wild soldier raced through the throng recklessly. Arjun in all his travels had never witnessed such scenes of levity, such a drunken orgy with men and women of all ages falling over each other in total disregard of decorum. The perky whores were all set to kill, even respectable women threw inviting glances at the passing men—bubbling with uncontrollable laughter. For Arjun it was a totolly new experience. In all his travels he had not come across such scenes of exhilaration which verged on the indecent.

He let himself be led by the merry crowd, having nowhere in particular to go. He saw a group of young men point to a horse drawn chariot obviously talking about the riders. Following their gaze Arjun turned around. It was Satyabhama and her companions going to offer their puja. Among them was an extremely good looking young girl. She had a soothing kind of loveliness which struck Arjun as if an arrow had gone through him. He stared at her. The girl too, obviously drawn to this well-formed youth leaned from her chariot. Their eyes met. She paused and Arjun was already under her magnetic charm. For a few seconds he could not take his eyes off her, and neither could she.

From the background Krishna was watching this. He came up and touched Arjun lightly on the shoulder. Blushing furiously Arjun asked, "Do you know her?"

"Of course, she is my sister Subhadra."

Arjun's reaction was one of acute shame. How could he commit such an act of indiscretion? He was ashamed of himself, of making a fool of himself before Krishna. Seeing him feeling so guilty Krishna came to his rescue. "There is no need to feel so crestfallen," he assured him. "Subhadra is a nice girl—soft and quiet as a lamb and she is wonderful company."

Arjun was always susceptible to feminine charm. He cheered up considerably. But was Krishna trying to make fun of his weakness

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—he tried to figure out. An amused smile played on Krishna's lips. He spoke slowly, "My dear friend, do you desire my sister? I have yet to know if she would reciprocate your feelings. Besides there is my father. He may not agree to this union. What are we going to do then? You have to decide on how you are going to win without taking undue risks. Do be very careful. But in whatever you do you can always count on my help."

They walked up to the entrance of the palace where Arjun was putting up. Krishna showed Arjun the way to his chamber, then leaving him to his thoughts he left him.

Left to himself Arjun pondered over the problem. He was finding Subhadra irresistible, life would be meaningless without her. A woman like her was just the right sort to give him the companionship he needed in his lonely life. Yet winning her would not be easy. For an able archer like Arjun taking her by force was child's play—something Krishna knew very well. In fact he suggested this course of action but at the same time asked him to think before he jumped into action. This was what bothered Arjun. Did Krishna have his three other wives in mind—Draupadi, Ulupi and Chitrangada? The last two had excited him but those were more in the nature of political unions than anything else. Besides neither of the two were ready to leave their home, they did not figure in his family life. That left only Draupadi whom he had won by his prowess but he had to share her with his four brothers. She was not his very own, she would never be. She was a friend, mistress of the house, a royal companion but not someone with whom you could share the daily burden of living. One needed a woman who would make life worth living. Subhadra was perhaps this ideal choice—a lover and a wife who would be able to bestow him the happiness needed to make his life more complete.

No, nothing must come in the way of winning her. Arjun was determined. Yet Krishna had talked of risks. What risks were he hinting at—political? The Vrisni clan would not take it lying down if Subhadra was taken away, the dear daughter of Bosudev and the dear sister of her brothers. Steal her like a petty thief? That would humiliate the proud Vrisnis and instigate them to vengence. Their wrath would not only destroy the Pandav kingdom but put an end to the good relations between the Yadavs and the Pandavs. Only their enemies would be pleased. So all things considered perhaps it would be an act of political recklessness from someone who was in charge of the security of the Pandav state.

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The Pandavs had always acted emotionally. They put dharma before everything. But Krishna has taught them to judge and accept everything from a political angle. Arjun thought of the strange story of intrigue Krishna had told him in Probhas.

A three-pronged political tussle between Jarasandha, king of Magadh, Kamsa, king of the Surasenas and Vrisni with other Yadav clans had brought about the exile of the five Pandav brothers. Tactful Jarasandha married two of his daughters to Kamsa to clip the wings of the Yadavs who were becoming very powerful. Kamsa engineered a palace revolt, put his own father Ugrasena behind bars and put on the mantle of the ruler. He destroyed the Yadav republic under the suggestion of Jarasandha, bringing them to the verge of ruin. Kamsa emerged as an enemy of the people. The combined might of Kamsa and Jarasandha had the Yadavs worried. Moreover, to prevent the Yadavs from forming any alliance with the Kuru kingdom, adjacent to the land of the Surasena, an attempt was made to divide the Kurus and the Pandavs. Kunti was a daughter of the Yadavs—her sons must be prevented at all costs from claiming the throne. So Jarasandha convinced the blind king Dhritarastra that Kuru kingdom was already quite small. A further division would only weaken it, apart from creating problem among brothers. Besides the children of the eldest son are the actual inheritors.

Under his influence the blind king acted in an appropriate manner—sending the five brothers to the inflammable palace of Baranavata was only an excuse to have them out of the way. The memory of those days made Arjun sad and angry. He wiped perspiration from his brow. Politics indeed was a complex game.

Krishna had shed more light on the apparently incomprehensible puzzle. The Panchal kingdom was close to the domain of the Kurus. King Kuntibhoj had excellent relations with Drupad, the king of Panchal and he was also a friend of the Kuru king. This did not please Kamsa as he was a sworn enemy of the Vrisnis. Sons of Kunti were related to them and the king of Panchal was a friend. If they get together then Kamsa and Jarasandha would be in danger. It was not to their interest. So the two conspired not to let the Pandavs, the Panchals and the Yadavs come together. This alliance had to wait till Kamsa's death.

But why did Krishna recount all these in such great detail when there was no need for it! Was it to warn him from the pitfalls people are likely to slip into in the course of the daily business of living?

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No, the idea of taking Subhadra must be abandoned. It was a painful decision and it hurt him intensely. No matter how much he tried he could not forget the inviting glances, the sweet smile, her blushing face.

The Yadavs were in a festive mood as there was just one more day for the festival to end. They were letting themselves go with such gay abandon that this seemed to be the most opportune time to take her away. Only Krishna was keeping a watchful vigil. But Arjun's sense of duty and ethics made him pause. He could not make up his mind. He wished Krishna was there to advise him. As he was pacing his room impatiently Krishna walked in. Like a dying man catching at a straw Arjun rushed to him. "What am I to do my friend?" He pleaded. "My heart wants Subhadra but how can I break your trust. This conflict is eating me away. Oh Krishna do show me a way. Tell me how I can get her, my inspiration, the oasis of my parched soul. Tell me, show me the way.

Putting a reassuring pat on his shoulder Krishna smiled. His confident looks, his loving touch all pointed to one thing. After some time he said—"You are free to take her if she means so much to you. Don't be afraid—I'll be with you always."

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The news soon spread like wild fire. The Yadavs were angry and hurt; they hurled abuses at Arjun. The chiefs of all the clans—Andhaka, Vrisni, Bhoj and the rest mounted their chariots—ready for battle, for avenging their honour. Amidst the furore Krishna stood by, watching the outbursts, listening to the war cries. It puzzled every body to find him so unperturbed. At last Balaram asked for an explanation. "Why don't you say something Krishna," he demanded, "Your friend Arjun has turned out to be a betrayer, he has not only laid aside the trust we imposed on him but brought insult and ridicule to the entire Jadav community. What are you going to do about it—I beseech you!"

Composing himself Krishna spoke without emotion. His eyes were wistful. "I am surprised at you gentlemen," he said. "I hope you all agree with me that as an excellent warrior, a wise and brave politician besides coming from the family of Bharat Arjun is in every way an excellent match for Subhadra. We should also not lose sight of the fact that he is Kunti Bhoja's grandson. Only the bravest of the

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brave could have dared to accomplish such a feat in the true Ksatriya tradition. Custom permits this, so he has not done anything wrong, I would also say that politically this is highly commendable."

Balaram looked at Krishna, but he was too much under the influence of alchohol to understand the impact of what he was saying. "What was that about politics. Would you mind explaining?" He managed to mutter.

"Well," Krishna began, "it is something you have to feel. Because Arjun operates through the heart. His empire is in the hearts of people. He had willingly accepted the twelve year exile because he had to keep his word. He could have spent this period near their own domain. But he chose to set out on a tour of the country. His idea was to get to know the widely varying cultures of the people, to see at first hand how they lived and so he went to the people of different caste and colour, shedding the vanity of his Arya superiority. He stayed with them, took their food, learnt many things from them including the art of warfare. That was how he won them over. He achieved what the army of many kings and emperors cannot achieve. A large part of the country was thus part of Arjun's empire. One must admire his pragmatism, his political foresight. Could we find a better husband for our sister? I think Subhadra is lucky to have got him as her husband. And think of the advantages. Not only would this alliance bring prestige to our clan, we would establish friendly relations with Panchal, Pandav, the southern states and the eastern states like Nagraj and Manipur, much to the chagrin of our enemy Jarasandha. All this would bring a sense of security to the Yadavs. So in my opinion let us have the wedding complete before the enemies come to know if it. After all a decent wedding would also add to the prestige and good name of our clan."

The Yadav chiefs realised the logic behind these arguments. They were impressed. In fact it opened up unforeseen possibilities. So overwhelming was their wonder that for some time they kept staring at Krishna. Then all anger and frastration subsided and was replaced by satisfaction.

"I think what Krishna says is worthy of consideration"—said Balaram at last. "Let us cool down and get in touch with Arjun. The marriage should be celebrated as quickly as possible."

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CHAPTER FOUR

Accompanied by a large army and the brave Yadav chiefs Krishna and Balaram reached Indraprastha. They had the newly married couple with them.

Krishna was coming after a long interval of twelve years but time did not seem to have left its mark on the unchanging landscape. It still retained the placid looks of the country-side—the forests seemed to be sleeping still in the safe arms of a mother. It lacked the hustle-and bustle of a flourishing state. Krishna was pained by the look of austerity but he could not very well blame the Pandavs for this. Used as they were to a life of plain living the Pandav brothers shunned a life of luxury. They worked hard and understood the dignity of labour. So the atmosphere of idle enjoyment usually associated with big cities had no chance to grow here. The Pandavs welcomed honest enterprise and had kept all evil influences at bay. They wanted their life to be a model before the people, they wanted to be close to the grass roots. When in course of time the eldest Pandav would emerge as the unquestioned leader of united Bharat he would be able to provide the right kind of leadership, Krishna was convinced. The five brothers were the right representatives of the vast, mute humanity. They were men of action, it was only in the fitness of things, that they were chosen to provide leadership to the unfortunate millions.

He felt the day was not far off when Yudhisthir would be able to hold the entire people together through love, he would be worshipped as their very dear leader. Within a very short time he would be able to win over the loyalty of all his subjects.

Krishna was inspired to begin his work from right here—Khandavprastha. This could be the right spot. Now he would have to work out a strategy.

He felt burdened with a great responsibility—after all he would have to make all the preparations for the great task ahead. The first thing to be done was to reconstruct Indraprastha—the city of Khandavprastha should be suited to the glory of the rulers of Bharat. To do this the forest would have to give way to a new town-

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ship. The Pandavs had no experience of town building. So he would have to take complete charge. A magnificent palace should come up at an elevated ground in the centre of the city – unequalled in grandeur. Nothing but the very best would be good enough for the future kings of Bharat. It had to be unique in every way. In his opinion the famous demon architect Moydanab was the best choice for undertaking the job. But where was he to be found? He has been seen hiding in the adjacent forest. He must be found without delay. So Krishna set out, taking Arjun with him.

They left their chariot on the fringe of the city and began to walk westward along the Yamuna. This part was densely forested and quite impregnable. Following the trail made by animals they entered the heart of the forest. But they were not prepared for what they saw.

It was a strange spectacle. The fierce afternoon sun seemed to have drawn up the sap from every tree, plant, foliage and leaf. Not a patch of green was to be seen anywhere. The skeleton of the trees spread the bare branches against the back-drop of the sky—as though begging for mercy. But the merciless sun seemed angry, bent on reducing the entire forest to flames. The news seemed to have travelled to every nook and corner of the forest, alerting the beasts who were prowling about in silent steps. The draught coupled with the lack of food and water made them aggressive. So Krishna and Arjun kept their eyes and ears open as they proceeded almost on tip toe.

They came to an open spot adjoining which was a flat boulder. They looked about and found it safe. It was time for a little rest. The two climbed up onto the boulder. Somehow the boulders gave the evidence of human habitation. As Arjun looked closely he discovered figures and designs sculpted on the rock faces, obviously made by a race of men in some distant time. They looked like the ruins of a temple.

Arjun's surprise amused Krishna. He laughed and said, "You will find many such remains of old buildings. This used to be inhabited by a non-Aryan race—the domain of Takshaka, king of the Nagas. This looks like the ruins of a temple. But watch out, we are not here on a sight-seeing trip. A forest fire is about to start."

But Arjun was not listening. The strange inscriptions on a nearby rock face had drawn him away from Krishna. This particular boulder

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seemed very old and what he saw there took his breath away. He was not even aware of the presence of Krishna.

What had drawn him there was an odd looking chariot with a monstrious monkey perched on top. The chariot too was very unusual —not like the ones he was familiar with. The ensign had pictures of animals all bigger than life. The chariot was being pulled by horses as well as Gandharvas. What was most surprising was the war equipments—the bow inscribed seemed to be made of the spine of some big beast. There was the inscription of a circular bow which obviously had wrought havoc in the enemy flank. Headless bodies lay strewn about. Then there were clubs, conches and other instruments of war.

It was quite natural for Arjun to be fascinated by the wonderful display of weapons. Krishna could understand the feelings of a born warrior. In fact, he had anticipated it all along. From the way his face brightened it was obvious that Arjun was brought here on purpose. So his trick had worked : Krishna felt highly gratified.

As a matter of fact he was aware of the hidden remains of an old civilisation inside the Khandav forests. With his vast knowledge of the culture of ancient Bharat, its geography, philosophy and scriptures—there was hardly anything about this ancient land that he did not know. The reason he had brought his friend here was to acquaint him with the hidden wealth of the past. Arjun knew that Krishna had a deeper motive—it was not just hunting or an aimless stroll.

In a cave near the ruins were stacked all the original instruments the images of which were depicted on the rock face. The chariot, bows and arrows, clubs, the circular bow—all had to be collected before the forest fire broke out. No time could be wasted. Softly Krishna touched Arjun on the shoulder, bringing him back to the present. But Arjun was still too dazed to speak. An amused and pleased Krishna told him, "My dear Arjun—you can see the actual model of this chariot—in fact it is lying very close to us. It is for you to take !"

Flabbargasted, Arjun retorted, "Is this the time to make fun of me ? Please for God's sake leave me alone."

Krishna looked grave. "Believe me, I do not intend to make fun of you. I never do anything without a reason you should know that. Before I undertake any work I search for all the details, collect the facts then come to a conclusion. Listen—this place I have brought you to is the cradle of an ancient civilisation now lost to the world. It was

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non-Aryan in origin but had reached a height of sophistication as you can see for yourself. Hidden in caves, overgrown with trees are some of the most wonderful specimens developed by them—the likes of which have not been produced yet. They are over there, inside that cave—the chariot known as Kapidhwaja, the Gandiva bow made from the spine of the rhino and the Sudarshana Chakra. These are formidable weapons. No subsequent civilisation has been able to come anywhere near them."

Arjun stoon petrified. Now everything fell into a pattern. Giving his friend a grateful look he slowly walked towards the cave.

But Krishna's search was not over yet. There was someone around here whom he had to find. He had to be here since this forest was his safest hideout. Krishna was absolutely certain than Moydanab, the great demon architect had chosen this forest because he knew the god Indra would not be able to find him here. Moydanab had incurred the wrath of Indra over a woman. The king of the Gods was moving heaven and earth in search of the culprit. This forest belonged to Indra's friend, Takshaka—so Indra would naturally rule this out. But to Krishna it was evident that Moydanab would be here. He was not likely to come out till the fire reached his shelter. So Krishna decided to position himself near the exit—the head of a tunnel which was Moydanab's only escape route.

Then with a frightening crack the fire started—the flames shot up. Helped by the breeze the fire quickly engulfed the entire forest. Like hungry hissing snakes the flames devoured whatever came its way—nothing seemed safe from its onslaught. Meanwhile Krishna and Arjun were desperately trying to save the unique weapons-relics of a lost civilisation. After great effort they could put them away in a safe place. While they were thus engaged the deadly fire went on spreading, bringing all the inmates of the forest out in the open. The animals rushed helter skelter. They would be a danger to the people if the exodus went towards the city. So the two brave men stood guard, pushing them back into the fire to their ultimate death.

Suddenly the great demon emerged from a cave overhung with creepers. Scared to death he fell at the feet of Arjun. "Help me please, save my life O son of Kunti! I am Moy, the king of the demons, known as the earthly rival of Vishwakarma—the architect of the gods. Have mercy on me—save my life."

With a deadpan face Krishna signalled Arjun to push Moydanab

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to the same fate as the other inmates of the forest. He knew Arjun would react differently but kept a straight face. Arjun, not knowing that this was a pretence pleaded, "But dear friend you are always so kind to people who come to you for help, why don't you spare Moydanab. After all he is asking me—one of the Pandavs to help him—to disoblige him would amount to sin."

Not a little surprised at this concern Krishna was nevertheless happy. Fate has ordained this—he said to himself. Otherwise why should Arjun feel so concerned about this demon who after all was a total stranger. He looked at Arjun and succumbed to his request, "All right friend, whatever you wish will be done." This was exactly what he had in mind—to find Moy for whom he had plans. But nobody had an inkling of it. Krishna was not the sort of person who revealed his motives. Even his close friend Arjun was kept in the dark If the forest fire had not broken out Krishna had planned to set the forest on fire himself. At least he was spared the sinful act.

Moydanab was overwhelmed with gratitude. Ever since his clash with the mighty Indra he had been constantly on the run. Actually it was not his fault. It was only natural that Moy would demand to have his wife Hema back whom Indra had abducted. Indra was determined to kill him so Moy fled his gilded palace to hide in a mountain cave where Indra would not find him. But he had no idea that death would chase him in the guise of a forest fire. If it was not for Arjun he would have been dead.

Moy knelt before Arjun and bowed respectfully. "If you do not take it amiss" he pleaded, "I would like to do something for you. I am a celebrated artist—an architect, the equal of Visvakarma among the demons. Do let me have the pleasure of serving you. Nothing would give me greater satisfaction."

Krishna gave Arjun a meaningful look. Arjun understood what he was hinting at. So he said, "I do not want to exploit your gratitude but you may do something for my friend Krishna instead. That would be service enough for me."

"I am waiting for your order, Krishna," said the obliging demon.

For a few seconds Krishna managed to look suitably confused as though he was not at all prepared for such an offer. Then he said, "Well if you are so keen to please the Pandavs then I suggest you build a city and a royal palace of such splendour in Khandavprastha that it would come to be considered as one of the wonders of the world. It should excite envy but nobody should be able to

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imitate it. Remember your work will survive through the ravages of time—a silent witness to your unique way of paying back your debt. It will keep your name glorious. Only then would your labour be justified."

Moydanab bowed his head, denoting agreement.

The planning took some time. Then Moydanab began his work in right earnest. The foundation of the city of Indraprastha as also that of the royal palace were laid on an auspicious day. Proper valedictory offerings were made to Brahmins, gifts of good food and jewels. The Brahmins in their turn gave their heartiest blessings. So a good beginning was made.

Krishna watching his long cherished dream about to take shape felt relieved and satisfied. The future was uncertain and there was still a long way to go but the first step was taken. Like a woman's first conception it filled his heart with pride and joy. He began to dream once more of forming a new alliance with the eldest Pandav as the leader.

That was his secret strategy. Jarasandha anxious to grab the entire country was proceeding according to a well-chalked out plan. With the help of the other powerful heads of state like Sisupal, Dimbhak, Bhishmak, Poundrak, Duryodhan and the rest a new power structure was emerging leading to increased political instability in the country. Fearing an invasion the weaker kings slowly moved to the west. It was high time a rival power group was created in order to strike a balance—in other words the anti-Jarasandha power had to come together. How could this be achieved? To Krishna there was only one way out—formation of a new political alliance with Yudhisthir in the lead. But he proceeded very cautiously—nobody else had any inkling of what he had in mind. After all that was the only way to stop the expansionist policy of Jarasandha.

Moreover, Yudhisthir was the only leader who commanded universal trust and respect. His honesty and sense of duty were beyond question. Sincere, unprejudiced, truthful and totally without greed he was the most likely person to be accepted as a leader. The new political alliance would be founded on trust, friendship, loyalty, co-operation and peaceful co-existence. All for one and one for all —that would be the motto. Krishna was thrilled to see the beginning made with the laying of the foundation of Indraprastha. Already, he was having the first taste of triumph.

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CHAPTER FIVE

At last the famous, the most exquisite royal hall was completed. Dexterously designed with intricate inlay work using the world's most precious diamonds and jewels it was enough to take ones breath away. The astonishing grandeur was like the heavenly court of the god Indra. Moydanab's immortal creation was destined to go down in history as a work of unparalled beauty. It was the demon artist's tribute to the five brothers one of whom had saved his life—a tribute the like of which the world had not seen nor was it ever likely to see.

The brilliance of the palace outshone the rays of the sun, its proud head loomed against the sky like a high mountain. The gates and the ramparts were of white marble, the interior was decorated with frescoes and paintings—there were beautiful art objects and inlay work. The best exhibit was a crystal lake with transparent water and jewel bedecked banks. Gilded lotus, fishes and tortoises added to the total effect. The spacious courtroom had ornamental trees placed in a symmetrical fashion.

In no time word spread all through the country about the wonderful palace. Merchants, kings and other rich people flocked to have a look at this place of attraction. The magnificent palace of Indraprastha had them gaping in wonder—it was a feast for the eyes. The tall dome could be seen from far, proclaiming the glory of the Pandavs —so tall that it seemed to challenge the heavens.

The profusion of praise and the envy of the enemies did not leave the eldest Pandav unaffected. He was proud as well as delighted to watch the reactions of the enemies. In spite of the appreciation, the gifts and the astonished reactions they only fanned the flame of ambition. It was not enough to rule over the city—considered a wonder of architecture. He wanted to acquire more—to be the king of all kings. This urge left him dissatisfied. The more praise he received the more powerful grew his desire to possess more. He lost all peace of mind.

It was his practice to consult Krishna before taking any decision. But where was he—at this crutial point of his life? A special messenger was sent to Dwaraka to fetch him. But Krishna was taking

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a long time in coming, adding to the restlessness of Yudhisthir. Was he annoyed for some reason then? During the fourteen months of construction work Krishna never visited the site in spite of repeated requests. Had they offended him in any way—the helpless Yudhisthir was totally at sea.

To cool his agitated mind he went out to the terrace. The soothing breeze at once calmed his spirit. Looking up he saw his own desire reflected in the clear blue of the sky. Suddenly from out of the floating clouds he saw the happy face of his dead father looking down at him. His face had a halo around it. As he looked on with an expression of dazed affection his son blinked in wonder. It did not seem real at first.

As he joined his palms in adoration, not taking his eyes off the spectacle his father raised his hand. "I bless you, dear child." He said in a feeble voice. 'You are my favourite son, you are capable of conquering the world. You are lucky to have four loyal brothers. So why should you have doubts? Make up your mind, cast off all apprehension. What you must do is to have a Rajasuya Yajna to establish your superiority over all the other kings. Do not waste any more time." Then he faded away leaving a stunned Yudhisthir rooted to the ground.

After sometime Yudhisthir woke up and saw Krishna the unfailing friend before him. The sight of his old faithful friend brought tears to his eyes, "Where were you all these days?" He pleaded. "You know I feel so utterly helpless without you. This kingdom with all the wealth loses its meaning if you are not with us. It would be better if you take it all and let me have my freedom."

The loving remonstrations did not seem to excite Krishna. His lips twisted in an enigmatic smile. In fact he was quite prepared to face such a charge. Cleverly he changed the subject, talking about the exquisite carvings—the paintings and the inlay work of the darbar hall—the overall beauty of the architecture. Thus Yudhisthir's apprehensions were put to rest. He realised that he was their old friend after all—there was no reason to doubt it.

The gentle Yudhisthir who had never aspired for wealth was now a changed person. This change was brought about by circumstance—from being the owner of the spectacular royal court of Indraprastha he now looked beyond to other territories. The thirst for acquisition was something new in a docile man like him. But it did not surprise Krishna in the least—for this was only natural. Even the

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great man of virtue was no exception. He too was was susceptible to temptations.

Yudhisthir however was feeling a little embarrassed. He had unbounded faith in Krishna's wisdom. He wanted to take him into confidence, yet he hesitated to expose his weakness. The man of virtue changing his nature might amuse Krishna. Besides ambition could be dangerous—he was not unaware of the pitfalls.

Krishna used to appreciate the simple life-style of the Pandavs. "Do you know something Dharmaraj? Those who think enjoyment is all that matters in life are selfish and idle. They cannot think beyond themselves. The good of the country and the nation are never in their thoughts. In fact they want to create internal tension so that people fight each other and they can live in luxury. The rein of power must be in their hands. But it is so wasteful. They think it is the duty of the king to exploit—that might is right. They have no idea of either justice or virtue. The nation cannot prosper as long as these people are around."

Krishna's words had a kind of hypnotic effect on Yudhisthir. To-day, when the tables had turned in their favour he was held back by the memory of Krishna's words. Krishna watched him with an amused smile. Then he said, "What is worrying you so much? I am with you, let me share your thoughts. If you have thought of something let me have the pleasure of translating it into reality. Do not feel apologetic—let me know what is in your mind."

His words had the effect of lifting off a great weight. Yudhisthir clutched his hands, "Please Krishna, save me from greed, from worry. Only you can do that—show me the way, I beg to you."

It was only natural that a virtuous person like Yudhisthir would feel disturbed to admit the truth. Krishna could guess the cause of his trouble yet he pretended ignorance, "Why are you so upset, my good man, confide. I'll do my best to relieve you of your worry."

Breathing a sigh of relief the eldest Pandav went on. "All mortal beings are subject to the six passions and I am no exception. Do you know what I have been thinking? What if I also have a Rajasuya Yajna like our fore-fathers in order to establish supremacy over all the others? Just now my late father Pandu appeared amidst the clouds and advised me to go ahead. Tell me, how can I accomplish this difficult task? Without your advice and help, nothing can be done."

Blushing furiously, Yudhisthir blurted out his secret wish.

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Krishna was touched by his sincerity. "But that is an excellent idea." he said to cheer him. "Spoken like a king! Was this what was bothering you all this time?"

Krishna paused to have a good look at his friend. He began to think of the pros and cons. Though Yudhisthir was familiar with his sudden changes of mood, he was desperate. "What do you say, Krishna?"

Krishna was lost in deep thought. Yudhisthir's voice impinged into his consciousness and he came back to the present with a start. For a brief moment he hovered between two worlds, but he recovered quickly. The familiar smile lit up his face. 'You have pre-empted my wish my dear friend," he said. "I was going to suggest the Rajasuya but before I could bring myself to utter the proposal—you have said it."

"Of course not Krishna," Yudhisthir was at pains to put him at ease. "Please don't say that. We have got back everything only because of you. We have got back our old glory. All due to you. The Pandavs cannot think of moving one step without you—you are our crowning glory. Do forgive me if I have done anything to offend you."

The eldest Pandav was so simple and uncomplicated that he did not recognise a light hearted remark—he took everything very seriously. Krishna was a little embarassed. He took his hands and apologised—"Maharaj you need not be sorry, I was only joking."

Even as he was saying this Krishna's mind wandered—lines appeared on his forehead. The fact that Pandavs were now completely dependent on him put an extra burden of responsibility. So he had to be very circumspect—whatever decision he took had to be taken after weighing all the pros and cons. All his strategy planning must spring from the idea of the good of the Pandavs. The one black spot on the political scene was Jarasandha, the king of Magadha. All the kings lived in constant terror of him. Krishna felt it was his duty to save their innocent kings from the cruel and inhuman exploitation of Jarasandha. Besides, he also had his personal score to settle. How could he ever forget the humiliation of running away from him to the mountain fort of Raivatak in the distant Western coast? Leaving his ancestral kingdom of Mathura was not easy. The memory still touched on a raw chord, inciting him to revenge. The careful planning that constantly went on in his mind was kept strictly to himself. Nobody else must know how Krishna was proceed-

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ing towards sweet revenge. So far things had gone according to plan, even Indraprastha was a part of the grand design. Now the rest must fall into pattern. The desire of Yudhisthir to earn the status of an emperor indicated a step in the right direction. So his noble mission was on its way to be fulfilled. Krishna was thrilled. For some time he relished the pleasurable feeling. In his mind's eye he visualised the future, but when he spoke his words were fraught with foreboding. "But Maharaj, I am sorry to remind you that you are not entitled to doing the Rajasuya. Only an emperor has the right. You are only the ruler of a kingdom. Till you vanquish emperor Jarasandha you will not earn the right to perform Rajasuya. This is what the scriptures say—I cannot help it."

Like a crash of thunder his words hit Yudhisthir who was hardly prepared for the harsh truth. Nobody spoke. With all his hopes of performing the Rajasuya gone Yudhisthir felt shattered. So he would not be in a position to please his father—do what he had asked him to do? This was indeed an unexpected blow.

Meanwhile Bhim and Arjun had entered. They had over-heard the conversation. So even Krishna was scared of the fiend in human shape. Jarasandha? The two brothers looked at each other, surprised. They flexed their muscles. Bhim, not able to stand the silence any more blurted out, "What has that man got that all should be afraid of him? Tell me Krishna which mortal is not shaken by the sight of us two?"

Krishna smiled at his childish bragging—but he did not want to hurt his ego. He said mildly, "My dear Bhim he is not alone, I'm afraid. He has a lot of support, having defeated all the kings he is now a very powerful emperor, most parts of Bharat are under him at the present. To name a few, king Mahabal of Karush, the old Yavan king Bhagadatta of Mur and Naraka who used to be a friend of your father, the kings Karava, Meghbahan, the Kirat king Poundrak. The mighty Bhishmak of the Bhoj clan has also joined hands with him. The terror unleased by Jarasandha has made many leave their own country.

The Pandavs were not aware of all this. The long account of Jarasandhas exploits came as a shock to the three brothers. Crestfallen they asked Krishna—"Are you too incapable of defeating him?" Krishna faltered at this unexpected charge. Then answered carefully. "Well, only an honest person like you can ask this"—he said to Yudhisthir. "Well I have no hesitation in admitting my defeat. But

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we have not given up. I am proud that the Yadavs could hit back, again and again. Mind you, the Yadavs are a peaceful race—none of them, neither the Bhojs, Vrishni, Andhaka, Kukur or Satwat took aggressive action—they wanted to avoid a direct encounter. But killing of Kamsa was necessary for the good of the people. That was what angered Jarasandha. Ever since then the Yadavs have been his target. He could not take this political defeat lying down. Before the scattered Yadavs could come together he attacked. But I had advance information and acted accordingly. So Jarasandha could not make much headway, and temporarily he lifted the seige, but only to strike back. I was his main target. So to save Mathura I decided to leave the kingdom. We had no chance against his powerful army—even if we fought for three hundred years. What was the use of unnecessary bloodshed, so I left."

Krishna paused and looked at Yudhisthir. There was no bitterness in his looks. But the effect of these words on Yudhisthir was quite different. He was perturbed because when the Yadavs could not resist how would he do that particularly when he had nobody except the two brave brothers? Of course king Drupad could be counted as a friend. But king Drupad had not yet recovered from the damages inflicted by Arjun when he was offering the kingdom as a gift for his guru. Yudhisthir himself owned a very small territory. With his allies in the farflung corners of the sub-continent how was he to mobilise them against the powerful king of Magadh. He was merely building castles in the air. He was overcome with shame for having confided to Krishna about his secret wish. Faced with the reality of the situation he realised the futility of it. He wished he had not talked to Krishna about this.

Bhim and Arjun on the other hand had no reactions at all. They seemed to be enjoying the exploits of Jarasandha and listened to Krishna's account with rapt attention. When he stopped they grew impatient. "Please carry on Krishna," they appealed. "You are worried about something. What is it?"

"War tactics", said Krishna. "There are two ways one can fight. Either through the use of arms or through manipulation. To defeat him in open combat is almost impossible. But even the mightiest of the mighty can be made to surrender if one resorts to tricks. So I had to find out ways and means to weaken Jarasandha.

Let me tell you the secret story. The Magadha king had two loyal stalwarts : Hamsha and Dimbhaka, made invincible by a

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special power—no instrument of war could destroy them. One way of demoralising Jarasandha was to eliminate the two strong men. It so happened that Balaram had killed a king by the name of Hamsha. The news soon reached Magadha. Misled by the name Dimbhaka was stricken with grief and jumped into the Jamuna to end his life. His partner came to know of the tragic death of his beloved friend. Overwhelmed with grief he too jumped into the river. The loss of his two able stalwarts upset Jarasandha so much that he lost his confidence and could not attempt to take revenge immediately. This gave the Yadavs some time to shift their capital westward."

After Krishna had ended his story Yudhisthir felt immensely relieved. "Since you are so afraid of him what is left there for me to say. After all I do not consider myself more powerful than you. I quite realise that my ambition will remain an idle dream."

Amazed at the brother's reaction Bhim declared, "Your wishes will be thwarted because of one man. I can not let this happen."

"You are young and impetuous Bhim," Krishna smiled. "I can understand your impatience. But think of the consequences. I wouldn't like you to invite trouble."

"You are afraid Krishna," Bhim retorted. "You cannot make up your mind."

"It is not without reason, Bhim," Krishna smiled indulgently. "Rajasuya and Ashwamedha are different kind of Yajnas. Ashwamedha calls for a flexible kind of alligience but in Rajsuya it is total submission. Every king has to openly accept the sovereignty of the performing king, send him gifts and keep on giving taxes. In all practical purposes he loses his independence. This calls for caution and detailed planning."

Yudhisthir hesitated. "By detailed planning are you hinting at any scheme of deceit?"

Krishna's eyes flashed in anger. "Well," he spoke emphatically, "You may call it deceit but I prefer to call it strategy. It is the nature of every living being to resort to various tricks in order to survive. It does not mean deceit or falsehood although they may be a part of strategy. It has the sanction of the scriptures, particularly if the end is noble. Besides strategy, planning is an integral part of the political game. It has to be adjusted and new methods devised to meet the constantly changing situations. After all politics is a game of wits. Your success depends on how cleverly you can devise a plan and manipulate at exactly the right moment. Nothing is unfair in politics.

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A little deceit now and then is not considered wrong or against the accepted the code of ethics."

Arjun promptly answered, "I agree with Krishna. The values involved in political dealing should not be equated with the values of every-day life. Politics operates within its own code of ethics."

But Yudhisthir was not convinved. "If it is so difficult to perform the Rajasuya then I might as well give up the idea."

Krishna looked at him, amazed at his timidity. Was that the voice of a king? Instead of carrying authority it spoke of a weak willed person. Very often the eldest Pandav did things which were unbecoming for a king. At such moments Krishna felt nervous and apprehensive.

Yudhisthir's decision did not please the two brothers. In fact Bhim was openly annoyed. "A king who fights shy of combat, considers himself too weak to do anything ought to lose his freedom to a stronger ruler."

Krishna promptly picked up from where Bhim left off. "Are you aware that Jarasandha already has eighty-six such kings in his prison? He now has them in his capital Giribraja waiting for fourteen more victims. When they are hundred in number he will offer them as sacrifice to the deity in the temple. Are we going to watch the spectacle of hundred helpless kings being butchered like cattle? For shame! People like Jarasandha who rejoice in senseless massacre are a disgrace to all human beings. Are you not sorry for the victims? Don't you wish you could do something for those kings who are waiting for their terrible end. Can't you hear the terrible wail, desperate begging for mercy? Should you not come forward to save them from the beast in human shape. Don't they deserve your sympathy?"

Yudhisthir could bear it no longer. "Stop for God's sake," he cried out, "it is more than what flesh and blood can take. How terrible, how obnoxious!" His heart bled for the unfortunate victims.

Krishna watched the agony of Yudhisthir. By and by he composed himself and was back to his normal self. Inwardly delighted, Krishna made an attempt to calm him. "Your majesty, the only way to stop this massacre is to stand up against the brute. So a fight is inevitable. The whole world will sing the praise of the person who can successfully resist the evil scheme of Jarasandha. The entire country will come under him. He will have unstinted support and allegience of the imprisoned kings. Their combined army and

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resources will be at the disposal of the saviour. Needless to say this military offensive will have a great deal of political fallout."

"Your Majesty," said Arjun, "we have the best of weapons—bow and arrow, mace and chariots. We are powerful. With Krishna as guide why should we behave in a cowardly manner and shy away from battle."

"Between Krishna, Arjuna and myself we will finish Jarasandha in no time," added Bhima, "have no worry."

Still Yudhisthir was not convinced. "I am sorry Krishna. Bhim and Arjuna are my two eyes. You are my mind. How can I send them to the blood-thirsty Jarasandha and have any peace of mind. Forget about Rajasuya. Of what good would that be to me if I lose my brave brothers. I would prefer to leave Jarasandha alone. Certainly being an emperor at such a cost is not what I wanted."

Troubled at this new turn Krishna interrupted. "But your majesty you are thinking only of yourself—do not confine yourself to such selfish thoughts. Why don't you consider the immense good it would do to the common people, not to speak of the name and fame you will earn. Alas! common people are far from your thoughts. You are not bothered about them. But I am, I spend sleepless nights thinking of those innocent kings in chains. I cannot concentrate in my day's work. Unfortunately the people of Bharat are as timid and scared as you are. There is nobody to help them out. That is why the time is ripe for Bhim and Arjun to come forward. With your permission I can set out in our mission with your brave brothers and kill Jarasandha for a greater good. Dharma is in peril today, Jarasandha is standing in the way of preserving Dharma. Let us kill him and save Dharma. You will earn the praise and gratitude of all and acquire virtue."

The speech had its desired effect. Of course Krishna was right—realised Yudhisthir, what he said made sense. Yes, he was being utterly selfish—scared by the tyrant Jarasandha he was only thinking of the safety of his own family. But a king must protect the people as well—that was his foremost duty. He was grateful to Krishna for reminding him that a king has greater responsibility. By overlooking this he was on the point of committing an act of ommission. Krishna had rightly pulled him up.

"You are absolutely right Krishna," He said gratefuly. "I am stupid—I could not understand your actual motive. Now all my doubts

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are gone, I give you permission to proceed. You have my good wishes."

"You are too modest," retorted Krishna. "Do not embarrass me. I am always there to obey your command. Just utter the word and it will be done."

"But tell me Krishna," Yudhisthir was still hesitant. "Perhaps I have not understood your plan correctly. How do you propose to defeat the mighty Jarasandha—just the three of you ?"

Krishna laughed. He said reassuringly. "He has a huge army. We have no intention of involving them in a battle. We would challenge him to a duel. After all he is the one who deserves punishment, not his soldiers. Why should the soldiers suffer for sins not committed by them. Why should their family suffer ? Since Jarasandha is the culprit he must atone for his sins."

"That sounds very well. But why would he agree to keep his army out of the battle ?"

"Simple," Krishna smiled an enigmatic smile, "We are going to challenge him to a duel. He cannot possibly refuse. And that will be his undoing. The more courageous and clever of the two adversaries would win.",

"I don't get you." Said Yudhisthir, flabbargasted by the novel idea. "Why would you ask for a duel—on what ground ?"

Krishna was ready with his answer. "Your majesty we will give him two alternatives. Either release the prisoners or face us in open combat. Being a warrior by nature he would naturally choose to fight. To wrestle."

He went on. "Have no worry my king. We will not enter like sneak thieves but march right in—dressed as Brahmins."

"But how do you know that he would prefer to wrestle ?"

"That is a pure guess. He is very proud of his physical prowess and I am positive that he would choose Bhim and not me or Arjun. He would want the best adversary."

"Well, that is a clever plan," Yudhisthir could not but be impressed. What a wonderful way to get rid of the rogue with the least bit of bloodshed. He raised his hands to bless Krishna and his brothers. "May your mission be successful Krishna."

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CHAPTER SIX

Jarasandha the chief opponent of the Jadav clans finally met his end in the hands of Bhim. With him one of the leaders of the biggest power bloc was eliminated. For Krishna however there was still a long way to go. It was only the first phase of his elaborate plan of action. There was a lot to be done. The death of the Magadha king left him with no immediate worry—the atmosphere now was more conducive to thoughtful planning. From now he would be able to devote more time to the development of the Pandav kingdom and proceed more confidently towards his ultimate goal—building of a United Bharat.

Now that the main hurdle was over, Yudhisthir could look forward to a successful performing of Rajasuya leading to the coveted title of an emperor. But it seemed to Krishna that the opponents were still active. They were bound to create problems.

Already the followers of Jarasandha were blaming Krishna for the death of their leader. They had always been hostile to the Yadavs and particularly to Krishna. Sisupal, Jarasandha's loyal lieutenant was still around. He led the tirade against Krishna though ironically both were related.

The allies of Jarasandha were capable of going to any length to take revenge. Though they held the Pandavs in high esteem they might not spare the dream city of Indraprastha as a punishment for being friendly to Krishna. Krishna was apprehensive of such a move —a possibility which could not be ruled out.

Under the circumstances the Rajasuya ceremony could run into rough weather. The only alternative was to make the rulers of other kingdoms accept the authority of the Pandavs either through bonds of friendship or by the use of force. Krishna pondered over the problems. Without wasting any time the Pandavs must set out on their victory march, and strike before the enemies were ready. The allies of Jarasandha were still without a leader. They had not yet recovered from the shock. This was the right time to strike as the opponents were in disarrey. Each king would be busy defending his own

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frontier. They would not be able to provide help to the other allies, leave alone present an united front. So the time seemed to be ripe for a lightening strike.

Besides, Krishna wanted to take advantage of the power vacuum at the top. Perhaps a tension was already building up among the allies each vying for the empty pedestal. In all likelihood Sisupal the Chedi king was aiming for the top position and already making his own secret preparations.

Weighing all the pros and cons Krishna decided that this was the most suitable time to begin army movement. As soon as they had the green signal from Krishna four of the brothers—Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadev fanned out in four directions—east, west, north and south.

These expeditions were a necessary part of the Rajasuya. Only when the four armies romped home to victory could the ceremony begin in the true sense and the authority of the Pandavs established. No king was likely to accept the sovereignty of any other kingdom till he was forced to cower before the advancing troops. It seemed to Krishna that all other states would thus come to recognise the military might of the Pandavs leading to a perceptible increase in their sphere of influence. The conquered states would come to depend more on the Pandavs who would now assume the role of the protector. In a way it would also extend their boundaries. Most important of all were the gifts, taxes and other collections which would be pouring in. The army movement in this case was not to wage a crusade or build up an empire but to augment revenue and spread political influence.

Krishna knew that the four Pandavs would come back victorious yet his mind was not completely at ease. He had apprehensions about Bhagadutt of Pragjyotishpur, the Chedi king Sisupal, Karna the king of Anga and last but not the least the crown prince of Hastinapur Duryodhan himself. Would they accept the dominance of the sons of Pandu without a murmur and agree to pay the levy? If battle became inevitable how would Bhim take on Karna and Sisupal? And what would be the outcome?

It was a deeply troubled Krishna who reached Dwarka. The city was waiting to accord him a hero's welcome—the news of the killing of Jarasandha having already reached there. Nothing could have delighted the Yadavs more and they went all out to celebrate—decorating the streets with the traditional mango and deodar leaves, stringing garlands of flowers. The buildings flanking the main

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streets also received a face lift. Colourful festoons fluttered in the breeze. The city wore an air of festivity. The main entrance—the huge marble gate was also flower—bedecked. Arches were put up at intervals—each a delight to the eye. A gorgous silk canopy was put out in the city square—the kind normally done to welcome a victorious king. The murder of Jarasandha was such a sensation that the ecstatic Yadavs decided to give Krishna the grandest welcome. They wanted to convey to the best specimen of the Vrishni clan how much they honoured and adored him.

A great crowd surged by the roadside, anxiously waiting for their hero. As soon the flag on the top of the chariot was visible they cheered so lustily that it could be heard from miles around. As the chariot drew near the people flung flowers, the Brahmins chanted hymns and music drowned the chanting. Shrill conch sounds heralded the home-coming of their favourite hero.

Not prepared for an euphoria of this scale Krishna was nevertheless moved by the love of his fellow kinsmen. Blushing deeply he asked Balarm· 'Why are they celebrating? Is it to welcome me? But what have I done to deserve this?'

As proud of his brother as the rest of the clan Balaram answered with obvious pleasure, "They are proud of you, Krishna. They look upon you as their saviour. The slaying of Jarasandha was masterminded by you. Bhim was only following your orders. He was just an instrument. But what you did was far more difficult. As a matter of fact you fought the battle like a true ksatriya. You kept yourself in the background but your intention to enter the lion's den and to challenge him in open combat was an act of outstanding courage. You have done us proud, Krishna—you have brought glory to the entire Yadav community. The chief adversary of the clan is dead now they can live in peace. Naturally they are grateful. This is just an expression of their happiness. You should not feel that they are overdoing it."

Krishna felt flattered and gratified but all the same he could not help feeling a little embarassed at such praise. He looked away, wishing his elder brother would change the topic.

The festivities went on for over a month. The new sense of security generated by this event was evident everywhere, in all sections of the society. People gave vent to their relief with a gay abandon.

A wild orgy of drinking and merry making followed. The young

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and the elderly forgot all restraint and indulged in pleasure. They sang, they danced, they thronged the theatres. They wanted to have a good time. Yadavs used to be a hard-working race. The whole spectacle disappointed Krishna. He had not visualised the change, the degradation that the death of Jarasandha would bring about among his people.

How was he to tell them that there was no reason to be complacent. The pleasure-loving Yadavs were totally unaware of the danger lurking at their door. There was Sisupal, a sworn enemy of Krishna. He could wreck the republic any moment, if he so wished. But the Yadavs were blithely unconcerned. Since Krishna was their protector they seemed to have no worry. Let Krishna look after the kingdom leaving them to a life of pleasure. Krishna had no hope or expectation from these idle people. But the large territory had to be adequately protected and saved from ruin—a job he could not very well manage all by himself. So in desperation he clung to the Pandavs even before they had come back to power.

As days went by his dependence on the five brothers grew. He admired their selfless nature the way Yudhisthir ran the administration never wasting the people's money for his own pleasure. He recognised the people's right to the wealth, like an ideal king. Even his other brothers were equally considerate and preferred to lead a simple life.

Krishna was so engrossed in thought that he did not notice Satyabhama enter the room. She touched him lightly on the back. Krishna turned round to find his wife waiting with an inviting smile on her lips.

But as she noticed her husband's grim expression Satyabhama discarded her flippancy. She asked anxiously, "What is the matter my dear? You are pained about something, isn't it? Do tell me what it is."

An affectionate smile lit up Krishna's face. Taking his wife in his arms he whispered, "It is only because of you that I'm here my darling. Otherwise I would have left for Indraprastha long ago."

—"You had me worried, really."

—"You think of me a lot, don't you?"

—"Why should I?" she said playfully.

—"Then I am not going to talk to you."

—"Fat lot do I care".

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Satyabhama turned her back to him. Krishna pulled her towards him, looked at her full in the face and planted a light kiss on her lips.

"Will you let me go?" Struggled Satyabhama. "But come on now, out with the truth. Who was in your thought? That is what I would like to know."

Krishna felt tempted to tease her a little. He gave her a quizzical look and enjoyed her nervousness. "Suppose I tell you that you are going to have one more co-wife? Would that anger my little wife?"

She realised that it was a joke and smiled. Giving him a loving peck on the cheek she said, "With sixteen hundred at your disposal... but anyway. You didn't answer my question. What was in your mind a little while ago?"

Krishna drew a long breath. "Suppose you tell me".

Pleased that her husband put so much trust in her Satyabhama replied "Do you mean it?" She gazed at him, trying to fathom his innermost thoughts. "Well", she began, resting her head on his chest, "You are thinking about the changed relationship between the Yadavs and the allies of Jarasandha now that the mighty king is dead. But the Yadav noblemen are neglecting their work—they can't be depended upon. Isn't this what you are thinking of?"

Krishna was so surprised that for some time he could not speak. Finally he said, "You are absolutely right Satyabhama, what an excellent thought reader you are. This is truly remarkable."

Satyabhama relished the compliment. She looked at her husband with a mixture of amusement and respect.

"Do you know something my dear" Krishna went on, "At times I feel so tired, so disgusted that I want to give it up, to become one among the crowd, live the life of an ordinary man. But something pulls me back, and I return like a man under drug. This is my sphere of work, how can I run away from it? Yet doubt persists. Would I be able to do it? Single-handed? Would I succeed in wiping out the tears of millions of exploited and meek people, the unfortunate people of my great country, my Bharatbarsha and lead them to a better life? Would my effort to set up a just government, a dharmarajya ever bear fruit? I don't know, I just don't know. But I so hanker for a little place in the hearts of my countrymen."

Satyabhama, touched at Krishna's confession reassured him, "But you have to succeed. You are the friend of the downtrodden, protector of the meek—if you don't succeed, who will? You do not want anything for yourself—all your plans are for others. Besides the noble

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Yudhisthir is your good friend. So you are bound to win the battle of dharma."

"You are absolutely right my dear. The children of Pandu are men of initiative. The safe life of an idle lotus eater is not for them. They are ambitious—they want to expand their territory. They are enemies of the wicked, friends of the just. Like me they also wish to rid the people from the rule of tyrants. They are for ever waging war against what is unfair. I have a firm conviction that some day they are going to take my message of a just society all over the world. The dharmarajya of my dreams would find its final fulfilment through them."

* * *

Often Krishna would retire to his own room. He liked to be left alone, alone with his own thoughts. He spent entire nights looking out of the window, gazing at the sky. Only the seniormost wife Rukmini was aware of this because when everybody slept, she crept to her husband's room. This was a routine with her although she was not always sure to find him there. Still she had to come before going to bed.

The light was on. Rukmini pushed open the door which was not locked from inside. Krishna reclined on a seat of black marble, the flickering light of the earthen lamp threw his shadow on the wall. It was a picture of utter loneliness. Rukmini's heart went out to this solitary, tired man.

She tiptoed up and touched his head gently. The eyes which put the beauty of the lotus to shame opened to find the lovely face of Rukmini bent over him. In the soft light she looked pure and serene. Krishna signalled her to sit on the arm of the chair.

—"Why aren't you asleep?

—"You are not asleep either"

Nobody talked. After a while Rukmini, sensing something was wrong asked with concern:

—"What is the matter my love?"

Krishna's eyes were closed. It was obvious that they were moist. Would he not share his grief with any one? Rukmini stared at him for a long time. She went on caressing his head, combing his curls with her lovely fingers.

—"You have something in your mind?" Krishna asked.

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—"No, nothing."

—"Come on, tell me."

—"You are tired."

—"That does not matter. Your company is enough to take away all my exhaustion. You make me cheerful."

—"Well then, lie down like a good boy. Let me stroke your head."

—"That won't be necessary. I am fine, just be with me for a while."

—"Very well. Now, a penny for your thoughts."

—"Can you guess ?"

—"Well, let me." She pretended to think. Leaning close to him she said playfully, "allow me then."

—"Of course." Krishna's eyes were dancing with delight.

—"You are thinking of Jarasandha."

Krishna sat up with a shock. "Goodness ! How do you know ?"

—"From the tears. There is no reason to be sad. Yet you are shedding tears."

Embarassed at being caught, Krishna attempted to give an excuse. "Have you heard of anyone shedding tears for his enemy."

—"I do not know about others. But I know my husband who is like a child. His heart aches for the poor and the wretched, for friend or foe alike. Though an enemy of the wicked he cannot help mourning the death of the crook. It is sin he is against not the sinner."

Krishna, greatly moved, took her hands into his own. "You do think very highly of me," He said.

—"Nobody understand you as much as I do, not even my loving sister Satyabhama."

Beyond the window the forest looked magical in moonlight. To Krishna Rukmini seemed to be as mysterious. Her power to read his mind was quite uncanny.

Something came over him. It was as though he was speaking from a far away place. "You know Rukmini sometimes I wonder who I am, why was I born, why am I doing all these. I am not a king nor do I wish to be one. So what is the use ? Why do I act like one, doing the duties, sharing the responsibilities of a king ? I am being used by some unknown power. But why ? For what purpose ?"

—"My dear you own the hearts of the people. You are a true king in that sense. The all-merciful god has sent you here to protect the

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meek and the poor. You are only following his direction doing his work as his representative."

Krishna looked at his wife lovingly. His eyes shone with happiness.

—"You are right Rukmini. Yet I am beset with doubts, as I have no dearth of critics. After all the mighty Jarasandha was a devotee of Shiva—a true and sincere worshipper of the gods. He had also great respect for Brahmins. He possessed all the qualities of a true Ksatriya. He was noble, brave and straight forward. But his vanity and boastfulness, his lust for power brought about his ruin. Though he was the bitterest enemy of the Yadavs yet I mourn for the brave warrior that he was, one who had courage, political wisdom and organising skill. Of course he was ruthless but I was amazed at his magnanimity when he did not kill or imprison us. He had the opportunity. He could have killed all three of us if he wanted to. He surprised us by accepting our challenge to a duel. That for me was a moment of defeat."

Rukmini protested. "You should never feel this way. It is your goodness which makes you appreciate the greatness in others. You do not bear any animosity towards your life-long enemy. But you had to act when he overstepped his limits and flung the defeated kings in a cave to have them butchered like animals. What you did was not an act of revenge but a just protest against an unfair act. The idea of killing him was far from your mind. This was done by the Pandavs when he proved to be an impediment to the performance of the Rajasuya. You were only instrumental in the process. As a matter of fact Jarasandha had outlived his time. It was destiny which sent the Pandavs as messangers of death. If any one is the killer of Jarasandha it is destiny, not you."

—"You are perfectly right, my dear," Krishna agreed. "It was destiny."

Rukmini went on, for she wanted Krishna to be rid of a feeling of guilt. "Yes it was destiny. He had to pay for his own mistake. It was a mistake to accept the challenge in the first place. Used to soft living he was in no physical condition to face Bhim. He was an expert in the weilding of weapons. He should not have descended to the level of a common wrestler. And he had to pay a heavy price for his own lack of judgement. It was not your fault."

Her reasoning appealed to Krishna. This was the first time that his seniormost companion had revealed her intelligence and power of

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analysis. A great weight was now off his mind. Giving her a look of fond appreciation he murmured, "you are wonderful. You have made me feel so inadequate. I must—"

Rukmini stopped his advancing hands. "That's enough." She said. "It is quite late—hardly the time for dramatics."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Their conquest completed, the four Pandav brothers were now on their way to Indraprastha. As soon as the information came from Yudhisthir Krishna left Dwaraka, without waiting for a proper invitation, ignoring all social norms and protocol. Usually he waited for a request to visit them since he was related to their mother's family and had to observe the customary code of behaviour expected of a kin. But this time all such considerations of social etiquette were thrown aside—he was in a hurry to reach Indraprastha for a completely different reason.

The Rajasuya was as much Yudhisthir's responsibility as his. Through this magnificient ceremony the various scattered kingdoms would be brought together. So everything had to be perfect. After all Krishna was the brain behind the event, Yudhisthir was neither the sponsor nor the performer. He was only the instrument and would enjoy the fruits of action.

The inexperienced Pandavs needed his help at every stage. It was a ceremony of gigantic proportions. Krishna was aware of the fact that he would have to take complete charge – the thought did not let him have a moments peace in Dwarka.

Long and careful preparations usually went before such events. It was not only time – consuming but involved expenditure on a grand scale. In making a comprehensive plan the most important thing was assigning a suitable person for each task. At the same time the relations and friends had to be kept in good humour. In fact this work allotment was the most difficult part of the entire endeavour. The planning had to take into account various cross-currents and relationships. So much had to be attended to that Krishna felt he was wasting his time at Dwaraka. While the four brave brothers were marching through the length and breadth of the country Krishna made careful calculations and drew up a plan for dividing the work involved in the Rajasuya.

He knew there would be hurdles. Even after a victorious return of the Pandav army there might be last minute hitches. One had to be on the alert, specially when there were enemies ready to pounce

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at the slightest excuse. It was the antagonistic Sisupal, Krishna was afraid of most. He remembered the prophecy that Sisupal would be killed by him. He was promise-bound to Susupal's mother to excuse him for a hundred offences. But he would soon cross the one hundred limit and Krishna would have no moral scruple to kill him.

Yet Krishna was torn by conflict. His adversary was a cousin, son of his father's sister but he had never felt any brotherly love towards Krishna. On the contrary all his actions were propelled by hatred. Jarasandha made full use of his anti-Krishna sentiment by making him his general with the same rank as Kamsa and did his best to create a division among the Yadav republics. Sisupal was encouraged to spread discord and tension among them.

The result was cold war between the king of Magadh and the Yadavs. But Sisupal in his blind obsession could not see through the game and foolishly began to go against the interests of his own people. All the Yadav republics were thus subject to a continuous psychological pressure. All these events flashed across Krishna's mind and he was doubly determined to foil any attempt of this wicked companion of Jarasandha to wreck the Rajasuya.

Sisupal had conceded before the advancing army of the Pandavs and agreed to pay the levy. But such a move may well have been a deliberate device. One could never trust a scheming and ruthless villain like him. His loyalty could very well be a camouflage. During the Rajasuya the prominent role of Krishna would not please him. There was no knowing what he might do. He could destroy the function. Krishna did not want that the Pandavs should come to any harm because of him. Their interests and his interests were now one and the same. The presence of Sisupal in Indraprastha was a danger signal but he had to be invited nevertheless.

He thought it best to leave his name out of the list in which various duties were assigned to various people. That would be a good way to avoid unnecessary complications.

In actual fact Krishna was shouldering the entire responsibility. He was doing it for Yudhisthir who had neither the intelligence nor the courage expected from a seasoned statesman. Weak and indecisive he was perpetually dependent on Krishna much in the same way a child turns to its mother for support. He was unable to take any step without consulting Krishna, even the Rajasuya would have remained a dream if Krishna had not come forward to take charge.

With the elimination of Jarasandha a new political equation was

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about to emerge. The Rajasuya was a necessary step to ensure a leading role for the Pandavs in the new power structure. The weaker states acknowledged the supremacy of the Pandavs, the more powerful ones were subdued by force and by extending bonds of friendship many far-flung kingdoms were brought together. The Jarasandha faction felt left out and were compelled to bow before the Pandavs. But the whole scene was still very fluid. The Rajasuya would give it a concrete shape. A new political alliance would be formed with Yudhisthir as the acknowledged leader. The way to a new Bharatbarsha would be cleared—a strong unified Bharat—based on mutual love and co-operation.

As anticipated by Krishna none of the hostile kings including Sisupal, Karna and Duryodhan made any attempt to put up a resistence. On the contrary they applauded the venture and sent plenty of gifts to Yudhisthir. The king staking his claim to superiority was so meek, modest, just and virtuous that none of the kings had any qualms about recognising his authority. It made Krishna's task easier, for after all Yudhisthir did not display any imperial ambition. He was keen to establish a positive relationship between the protector and the protected.

The victorious expedition helped to create a favourable image for Yudhisthir. This would eventually lead to the establishment of an undivided Bharat—a dream Krishna was nursing for many years.

Naturally he went about looking after the preparations with a light heart. Everything went according to plan and was finished ahead of schedule. Invitations were sent, the city of Indraprastha got ready to receive the guests. The streets were decorated with the flags of all the participating states. The city wore a festive look, the people went about happly, the air was heavy with the smell of incense and sandalwood. The guest houses were spruced up with gold lace curtains.

Finally the guests started arriving. All were assigned to a proper accomodation according to ranks with corresponding places for their companions and servants. All the royal guests came with large contingents, so very soon Indraprastha was over crowded, the guests far outnumbering expectation. More guest houses had to be built quickly. All the Pandav brothers supervised the arrangements because it was a matter of their honour, particularly that of Yudhisthir. No one should find fault with their hospitality. There was music, dance, plays, plenty

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of drinks with beautiful women to keep company so that the guests could go back with the memory of an enjoyable experience.

But as the great day drew near Krishna began to withdraw into himself. He seemed to lose his earlier exuberance and kept away from all the festivities. This sudden change in mood disturbed the five brothers. Had they, inadvertantly done anything to offend him? But Krishna was magnanimous, surely he would excluse them for any unintended transgression. Arjun began to ponder over the developments. It had begun ever since the Kauravs had arrived with Sisupala. It was as though their presence on the scene had triggered this odd conduct. Krishna had suddenly become a different person, avoiding the Pandavs, speaking only when spoken to. Even then he was not his usual cheerful self, but quite antagonistic. It seemed inexplicable at first but Arjun discovered that this change coincided with the coming of the guests. He conveyed his impressions to Yudhisthir. Krishna must have some deep reason although apparently he was acting as if he had been offended. A true friend of the Pandavs he could never be so rude. So it was better to leave him alone. After all Arjun was closest to him and understood him better. So the other brothers decided not to have anything to do with him, much to the delight of Krishna.

The guests enjoyed the predicament. They were inwardly delighted to see Krishna humiliated. At the same time they were critical of the Pandavs. How ungrateful of them to forsake the friend who had helped them to reach the top. In fact some of the guests were openly critical. Even if they were annoyed and displeased most of them thought it best not to let their resentment become too obvious.

The irrepressible Duryodhan however could not hold himself any longer. He spoke to the assembled royalty, abusing Yudhisthir in no uncertain terms. 'Yudhisthir has come to his present position only because of Krishna. It is a fact and the Pandavs have nothing to lose if they admit it. But now that the bad days are over they lost no time in getting rid of their sincere friend. The ungrateful and mean brutes! They do not need Krishna any more so decide to cast him off like an old piece of clothing. So much for the virtuous Yudhisthir.'

Sakuni, the son of Subala and prince of Gandhar made an appropriate expression of regret. 'Poor Krishna!' he exclaimed. 'What a pity.'

But Sisupal could not bear it any longer. 'Duryodhan, my friend, I beg to differ. You are magnifying Krishna out of all proportions.

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This is not fair to the Pandavs, particularly to Bhim and Arjun. They are warriors in the true sense of the term. They are brave and determined. Arjun has organising skill. Even Yudhisthir can keep his head in a crisis and take a decision. He is wise and mature. It is good to form a political alliance with such people. That coward Krishna has cultivated them only to serve his own purpose. He never comes out in the open. Look at the despicable way he had emperor Jarasandha killed. He had Bhim to do it. What do you call such a person? The worst type of coward!"

Karna, the king of Anga protested. "I wish I could say the same, Chedi-raj. I am indeed sorry that I do not think the same way. Krishna is extremely clever. He gets things done easily using his brain. Unless absolutely necessary he never takes recourse to arms."

But Sisupal paid no heed. He went on. "You are still very young king of Anga. You are hypnotised by Krishna's magic, you don't know him as well as I do—I also happen to be related to him. A selfish, mean, scheming villain like him is rarely born. Many people are not aware of his hypnotic power. He gets lots of things done through magic—which appears to you as intellect and brilliance."

At this point Bhisma interrupted, "Chedi-raj you are a brave warrior. But Krishna has something more—he is a clever statesman as well."

"Who says so!" Roared Sisupala, "I don't believe it. He is an impostor, cheat, a womaniser. He practises black magic, by which he misleads people. That does not add to his glory. I am sorry to contradict you my dear grandfather."

"Excuse me King of Chedi you mention black magic. Did not Jarasandha use it as a political weapon? Nobody had access to this magic, not even Krishna. He only learnt it while killing the two demons Aghasur and Bakasur."

Sisupal glared at the old man. He was about to walk out in anger. But on second thought he stayed where he was. He did not want to make a scene. Boiling with indignation he kept biting his lips in frustrated anger. Others were amused but Bhisma was not to be intimidated. "If you are to be believed, then Jarasandha has influenced countless kings through his power of hypnotism. Black magic itself can not take one to political prominence. Do you have anything to say to this Chedi-raj?" Bhisma smiled sarcastically and went on, "Let me tell you something Chedi-raj. I feel that Jarasandha could hold sway over a large part of the country by dint of his per-

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sonality and wisdom. In the same way we can not ignore the extraordinary intelligence and personality of Krishna."

Meanwhile Krishna was approaching the Kauravs to greet Duryodhan and Karna in particular. But as soon as he realised that he was the subject of the heated exchange he quietly turned back and left the place.

Not many had noticed him, but Sahadev did. His childish curiosity got the better of him and he ran after Krishna : "Why are you doing this Krishna", he asked, "you have been looking after the entire operation, guiding us, directing us, giving us the moral strength without which we would not have dared to take up this gigantic task. But in this day of rejoicing it pains our hearts to find you so dejected and withdrawn. What have we done to deserve this ? Moreover you have made yourself a subject of criticism, I don't understand this."

His voice was choked with emotion and tears came to his eyes. Krishna drew close to him and said with a spark in his eyes, "This is hardly the time for irrational curiosity. You should also know that some questions should not be answered."

He quickly left leaving Sahadev dumb-founded.

Presently Yudhisthir invited all his relations, friends and important guests to a special party in the inner hall of the royal palace. This was done by Krishna's suggestion. The stunning sight took every body's breath away. They were pale with envy. This obvious display of wealth resulted in various reactions which amused Krishna who was watching them from a distance. He tried to fathom what was going on in their minds.

Duryodhan standing close to Krishna reacted most violently. His envious eyes were going over the jewel-bedecked court room. He could have set the whole place to flames if it was possible to do so by gazing. He was hot and flustered. Already hostile to the Pandavs his antagonism now reached a new height.

Krishna watched him changing colour with obvious satisfaction. After some time he went to him and whispered, "Are you feeling indisposed, sir ? You look quite pale and tired. Perhaps a little rest would do you good."

The apparently innocent remark had a startling effect on Duryodhan. He began to perspire, not knowing what to say. His guilty mind trembled with fear. Was his feeling of jealousy so apparent ?

It took him some time to compose himself. At last, pretending

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that nothing was wrong he made a feeble attempt to smile. "No, no! I'm alright. I'm perfectly fine, why should I rest?"

Trying to hold back laughter Krishna answered, "Then you must be very hungry and thirsty." He tried to sound concerned.

This time Duryodhan was very firm in his refusal. "No, no, of course not."

By and by the first surprise and shock faded, even the noise subsided. Then Yudhisthir clad in a proper costume for the ceremony entered the hall flanked by Bhim and Arjun. He had a long jesmine garland up to his knees, sandal paste and incense filled the air as he entered.

Before taking his seat Yudhisthir touched the feet of the elders—grandfather Bhisma, uncle Dhritarastra, the great sage Vyas, Drona and Kripa. Then he greeted the rest of the relatives and friends with folded palm and asked for their blessings and good wishes. "I seek and beseech your help", he said, "All of you have every claim to all my wealth and property. A Yajna of this magnitude is hardly possible by my own effort. So if you come forward to help me out that will take a great load off my mind and you will earn my everlasting gratitude."

He could have knocked everyone down with a feather. It was indeed a rare gesture to admit the claim of a larger circle of relatives and friends to his huge asset. Moreover asking them to share in the performing of the Yajna was to give them the recognition and honour due to one's family members. Even those who were envious of his wealth could not help feeling flattered. They cheered him lustily.

This spontaneous expression of support took away the misgivings Yudhisthir had been nurturing for a long time. He was pleasantly surprised. Thus encouraged he was now more confident. He glanced at Krishna who was pleased at the success and signalled to the old grandfather Bhisma for instructions to proceed.

As Bhisma happened to be the most senior person present, Yudhisthir asked him to choose the master of ceremony and other deputies for the Yajna. But Bhisma on the other hand had faith on the wisdom and judgement of the eldest Pandav and he returned the compliment by asking Yudhisthir to do the selection. This was supported by the other senior members—Vyas, Dron and Dhritarashtra.

Yudhisthir walked up to the centre of the assembly. Folding his hands he addressed the guests, "Gentlemen, I do not think I am equal to this task grandfather has passed on to me. I appreciate

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his love and affection for an unworthy person like me. Yet his request is an order. I am also armed with the blessings of my forefathers. But the names I am going to propose now can be changed by Bhisma and the great sage Krishna if they so desire. I will certainly honour their advice."

There was murmur of applause. Yudhisthir was now emboldened to go on. He thought of his departed father and friend Krishna and declared, "Please listen to the names I am going to announce now—deputing each to a particular task related to the function before it is begun and after it is over. These are responsible tasks. I am allotting them by the order of grandfather Bhisma."

He paused. His eyes looked for approbation from Krishna. But Krishna's downcast eyes did not meet him. So Yudhisthir read out the list prepared beforehand by Krishna.

"The responsibilities should go to the person best suited for the job. So it is with great pleasure that I request our well-wisher Bhisma and revered teacher Dron to decide on the proceedings. I would indeed be much obliged if they agree to do so. Next comes the supervision and distribution of provision. I think our gourmet brother Duhsasan best qualified for this job. Aswatthama, the son of Dron would look after the Brahmin guests. Guru Kripacharya is indifferent to wealth. That makes him the best person to look after the treasury and disbursement of money. Virtuous Vidur will keep the accounts. I have no doubt that he will do a good job. To my dear brother Duryodhan I assign the job of giving away gifts and looking after the guests. Lastly I would consider it a privilege if uncle Dhritarastra, brother-in-law Jayadratha and Somedutta the Balmik king would take charge of overall supervision."

Yudhisthir looked at Bhisma for approval. All the seniors were impressed by his tact and wisdom. For some time nobody could speak. Yudhisthir had conducted himself well as truly befitting a king having leadership qualities.

Bhisma now addressed the gentry, thanking and appreciating Yudhisthir's wisdom. He approved of all the proposals—the sentries who stood at the doors relayed his message to all corners of the hall. This was again greeted by a loud applause.

When the noise subsided Yudhisthir spoke again. "My warmest greetings to all of you. But my work is not over yet."

A hush fell. What was it—everybody wondered. Yudhisthir smiled and said, "My good friend Krishna has a request which I must

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keep. He wants to wash the feet of all the Brahmins present. He wants to do it himself with your permission."

This was so unexpected and so much of an anti-climax that for some time nobody knew what to say. They looked at one another in dismay. Krishna kept staring at the floor, sitting next to Duryodhan —with a mute appeal in his eyes.

At long last Bhisma spoke. "Bravo, my dear Krishna" he said, "It is not for nothing that people speak so highly of you. You truly are the greatest of all men. I salute you."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

At last the august ceremony was about to commence in the presence of the invited royalty, noblemen, brahmins, rishis and sages.

As was the custom the ritual of receiving the priest, the chief performer of the Yagna, relatives by marriage and brahmacharis was done first. Yudhisthira then approached Bhisma and asked him, "The process of greeting each and every king with proper protocol might run into a fortnight. What should I do then ? Please advise me".

"In this case you may choose a few representatives. That will do. But before you do that the best person has to be felicitated first. I hope everybody would agree with me".

The door-men relayed his words to the furthest part of the hall. A murmur arose followed by loud cheers which echoed from piller to piller. It was a very good idea.

The murmur subsided though a low conversation went on. But it did not disturb the proceedings. Some of the kings were worried—who would be considered the best among the assembled kings ? — naturally it aroused wide expectation.

There were many eminent people present. They were all curious to know who would be chosen by Yudhisthir and who would have the bad luck to be left out. In their pride each considered himself to be the best person to receive the award.

The award was not be taken lightly because it involved the honour of a family and a clan. As Yudhisthir was taking his time to call out the names of the receipients, the people were getting impatient. There was tension in the air.

Yudhisthir was known to be honest and truthful. He was never afraid to tell the truth, however unpleasant. He was already a legend. So the assembled kings, as each waited with bated breath thought the just king would surely pick him as his choice. They built castles in the air and indulged in all kinds of day dreams.

Yudhisthir on the other hand had his mind set on Krishna not because he was always with them even in times of distress but on an objective estimate he did not find anybody who could come anywhere near him. But the opposing camp was not likely to accept his

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decision and could accuse him of being partial. This would be bad for his reputation. It would stain his perfect record. Yudhisthir found himself in the horns of a dilemma.

It was not just a question of Yudhisthir's reputation. It involved Krishna as well, who after all was a respected leader of the Yadav republic. Coming from Yudhisthir, his choice would immediately take on political undertones and complicate matters. Under no circumstances would the opposing faction admit the superior status of Krishna and with him that of the Yadav republic. To them it would look pre-arranged, done to serve the interest of the Pandavs. That would not be fair to the unblemished image of Krishna—the image of the noblest of mortals.

So the Pandav king was in a fix. How was he to reconcile all the discordant elements? But there was Bhisma, the seniormost statesman whose advice he sought at first. It seemed to Yudhisthir that Bhishma should be given this very responsible task. So he folded his hands and put his proposal before the assembly, "Since Bhisma is the most important and experienced person present here I ask him to choose the most distinguished person for the award. Grandfather would you agree to this and oblige?"

The manner in which it was spoken pleased Bhisma and all the others as well. Even the opponents of Krisna were happy, Yudhisthir's request was greeted with loud applause.

Things were happening according to plan. Krishna was relieved that nothing was going wrong. He had everything chalked out to the last detail.

There were several reasons behind his suggestion to the eldest Pandav to pass the ball to Bhisma. Thus Yudhisthir would not be directly involved in the selection, the responsibility would be Bhisma's. Whatever the outcome, Yudhisthir would be spared the unpopularity.

Besides, Krishna knew how much Bhisma admired him, how much respect he had for Krishna's excellent qualities. He also supported Krishna's political vision. Being a just man he would naturally consider all aspects before selecting the right man—and the right man would be none else but the Yadav hero. Of this Krishna had no doubt.

While the assembly waited for the announcement, Sisupal was growing suspicious. To him the whole thing smacked of a scheme—a political scheme engineered by Krishna behind the scene. He was

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pulling the strings while Yudhisthir merely carried out orders, acted as his political representative. But try as he might Sisupal could not understand the game.

He could not see why such an important political decision was left to Bhisma. Yudhisthir could not have been unaware of the implications. Did he want to avoid a basically unpleasant job or was it done with some other end in view? Being the king of kings he could not pretend to be as naive as that. Sisupal was not convinced. There was a deeper motive – he felt though he could not put his finger on it.

Both the Pandavs and the Kauravs were objects of affection to Bhisma. He did not discriminate between them which made the task all the more difficult for him. Was Yudhisthir putting his impartiality to test? Otherwise why would he choose someone from the Kaurav camp? Sisupal felt amused but instantly another idea struck him and his smile forze on his lips.

Why, the grand old man himself was the most distinguished person. So that was Yudhisthir's game – to deprive him of that nonour. It was indeed clever of him, but unfortunately Bhisma did not realise this. Sisupal felt frustration building up. But he kept his thoughts to himself and watched Bhisma very carefully.

Bhisma hesitated. The task was not easy. But he was more or less convinced that Krishna deserved the honour as he met all the necessary conditions in keeping with the purpose of the Rajasuya. It was Krishna who had organised it to bring about an union of all races and all kinds of people. Bhisma agreed with the idea of bringing warring states together, creating an atmosphere of goodwill and co-operation, putting an end to the politics of hatred. That was Krishna's idea and Bhishma welcomed it with all his heart. He had always admired Krishna, admired his selfless action, his leadership qualities. Ever since his childhood Krishna had been working for the downtrodden and he has been successful in all his efforts. It was a delight to watch him. One could not help appreciate his intentions. So he was the best person. His choice would be in keeping with the purpose of this nobie yajna.

Bhisma spoke gently, "My dear Yudhisthir, I cannot think of anyone better qualified than Krishna. It is his will which has brought us together in this sacred meeting ground. His pressence is sought by all–all are eager to hear him. He shines like a star among the heavenly bodies. His presence has been a delight to all of us. Honour him, Yudhisthir, he is the most deserving person."

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This was what Yudhisthir had been wanting to do all along. So the gods have been kind to him and granted him his wish. An humble and grateful Yudhisthir saluted the deity in silent homage.

As he gave the signal the door-men at once picked up the message and relayed it to the farthest part of the hall. A loud cheer went up. The hall resounded with the chorus of happy voices.

But there was a discordant element. It came from the Jarasandha sympathisers who occupied the middle rows. Obviously the announcement did not meet with their approval. When the cheers died down a different kind of murmur arose, one of resentment and displeasure. Sensing trouble Yudhisthir did not lose any time and quickly finished the ritual. The award was given.

Unable to bear it any more the Chedi king Sisupal let out a blood curdling houl. It was a savage cry, more like a wild elephant on a rampage than human. The ugly sound rebounded from each pillar and went round the hall. The cheers stopped. All eyes turned towards the angry king in dumb astonishment.

Breathing deeply, eyes aflame the Chedi king waved his first to Bhisma and roared, "So you are Bhisma the truthful. Wonderful! Indeed wonderful! you have betrayed the Kauravs who are your providers. Shame on you — a cheat, an imposter, a lier, you do not even deserve our hatred."

Sisupal glared at Yudhisthir and went on, "And you son of Kunti you amaze me. A deceitful fox, some of the deceit of your friend has been rubbed on you. And I had thought you to be too naive to understand politics. But we were wrong. Now you reveal your true colours, your false virtue. Even if you had wanted to flatter Krishna what right did you have to invite all these senior and respected kings, all of whom are better than Krishna in every way — and humiliate them? Do not think for a moment that we have agreed to pay you levy out of fear or that we sought the protection of your new alliance. Far from it, we merely wanted to help you in a noble venture. Look at the way you are treating us now. You decided to honour the villain who killed the celebrated warrior Jarasandha, using a mean trick. That man is a sinner and you have lost all your claim to fame by electing him as the best individual present here. The lust for the title of an emperor has made you lose sight of your conscience, your moral duty. I have pity on you."

He now turned to face the assembly. "Friends, Yudhisthir has played a dirty trick on us. He has insulted his honourable guests,

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clearly defying the dictates of dharma. Of course, the man directly responsible for this gross misconduct is the senile old man Bhisma. It shows to what extent Krishna's hypnotic spell has been able to transform this old man known for his wisdom. Did not Bhisma know that none but a king is worthy for such an honour. If they wanted to defy convention there was no dearth of suitable candidates. There were seniors like Bosudev, Drupad, Ashwatthama, Dron, Kripa, Salva, and Karna. No, they considered Krishna to be the best choice—it makes me hang my head in shame. A scoundral, a crook, a womaniser, killer of Jarasandha! Is he the best person?"

He burnt into disdainful laughter. The other kings of his group joined him. Presently the monstrous titter increased in pitch till it resembled the chorus of some evil spirits out to wreck the world.

Encouraged by the support of his comrades Sisupal now aimed his assault at Krishna. With venom oozing out of his eyes he began, "You greedy wretch, how could you accept this gift from the Pandavas which was motivated entirely by self-interest? People say you do not hanker after wealth and fame. Can we believe that any more, after the way you have conducted yourself, like a common begger? You should have felt ashamed to accept it in front of your father and other honourable people. You are so blunted by greed that you did not think of the honour of your father, not to speak of the rest. Well, go ahead, lick the leftovers of the Pandav feast and consider yourself much obliged—you self-seeking dog. How utterly disgraceful!"

Nobody knew what to say. After Sisupal stopped his theatrical outburst there was total silence in the court. Bhisma's face did not register any emotion, neither did Krishna's. But the Pandavs reacted differently. Arjun was flabbergasted, the eldest Pandav too was surprised. But both of them preferred to keep quiet. But Bhim was furious. He wanted to pounce on Sisupal and crush him to death, though he controlled himself with great effort.

In another melodramatic gesture Sisupal was about to stage a walk out with his followers when Bhisma called out, "Just a second, you imbecile crook. Let me tell you something before you go. It seems you have surpassed Jarasandha in his meanness. For your information, there is no single individual here who can match Krishna in any way. Krishna is the bravest, the most courageous, the most powerful and the most accomplished. He does not sink to the level of a plunderer or kill innocent soldiers to show his worth. He takes on the enemy in a direct encounter like a true ksatriya. Can you point

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out a single king here, including yourself who has not been defeated by him? Wait a minute. I have more to tell you, unpleasant though they might seem to your vile ears. In my long life I have yet to meet someone as great and as selfless as Krishna. The throne does not mean anything to him. His entire life is dedicated to the service of humanity. In fact the credit for this rajasuya where everybody irrespective of caste, class or creed would participate goes to him. Aryans, non-aryans, high and low, the ordinary and the distinguished have all assembled here to prove the truth that all men are equal—that god is present in every living creature. It is Krishna who has the humility to wash the feet of the guests. —Go and find me a man so unassuming, so modest. People love and adore him. It is a pleasure to see him, to have him near. People miss him when he is away. Now you see why I chose him to be the most distinguished person!"

These words fanned the flame of Sisupal's resentment. His allies were so excited that a showdown seemed imminent. Trying to save the yajna, the two brave Pandavs—Bhim and Arjun took position at two points ready to stop all indiscipline by force if necessary.

All through this near-pandemonium Krishna, the centre of the outrage remained his usual placid self. He even seemed to enjoy the proceedings. But soon his smile changed into a more purposeful smirk as the situation went from bad to worse.

The reason why Krishna did not take these outbursts seriously was the fact that he came from a democratic set up where difference of opinion was part of the system. In fact a democracy valued individual opinions. Patience was also part of a democratic attitude. But Sisupal came from a monarchy where the king was supreme. The king's will was law. The officers and people had to obey otherwise they would be charged with treason. Naturally the ego of the king was inflated out of all proportions, and he was beyond himself if anything hurt his ego. That was what had triggered Sisupal and he was all set to wreck the yajna.

But the younger Pandavs were finding it too hard to take it lying down. Sahadev, mad with fury blurted out, "I kick all those who are against Krishna".

That was the last straw. In a mad frenzy Sisupal continued his tirade, his followers egging him on. "Your majesties, did you not see what happened before your very eyes? I am surprised. Krishna has forged a powerful political alliance taking the Yadavs, Pandavs and their followers to counter the other alliance of Jarasandha. Did you

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not see through his game? This Rajasuya is just an excuse. True to his nature Krishna has acted like a sneak thief. Nothing short of seeing his blood would pacify me. I am going to kill him right here."

He began to perspire, his voice shook, he gnashed his teeth and declared, "Listen you son of Devaki. You don't deserve any honour. You are fit only to be butchered like an animal. Come and defend yourself if you can."

He charged like a wild tiger followed by his friends all set to defile the yajna site.

At first Krishna had decided to keep quiet, hoping that soon Sisupal would blow off steam and stop. The fact that he understood the political game posed a problem for Krishna because Sisupal always saw him as his only rival. Similarly Krishna too considered him to be his main opponent. Once his power was curbed others would not dare to do anything. But Krishna's plan went beyond that—he wanted to build an unified Bharat. But now his dream was being threatened. With success almost within reach would he give up without a fight?

It had always been against his principle to be the aggressor. He only fought in self defence. In fact for a long time he was wanting Sisupal to strike. Now the moment had come.

The opponents proceeded to the sacred site, determined to wreck the concept of the ideal kingdom of dharma for which Krishna strove. Shouts were followed by counter shouts. The peaceful assembly became a virtual battle ground. Trying to pacify the kings Krishna came forward. He began gently:

"Respected gentlemen, please accept my homage. Sisupal that scum of society, a slur on the entire Ksatriya community has challenged me to a duel. I accept his challenge most gladly. He is a relation of mine, I am sorry to say. But his conduct has been far from friendly. I have as much affection for him as I have for the Pandavs although Sisupal is unworthy of my affection. His attitude is hostile to me and also to the Yadavs. The Yadavs however have overlooked all his transgressions as he is of the same blood. But the ungrateful traitor Sisupal has pushed me to a point of no return. No amount of family loyalty can stand it any more. I have been a silent listener all through his tirade for the sake of Yudhisthir. I was anxious that the Yajna should be performed without a hitch. Perhaps you are not aware of his true nature, so I have to relate a few incidents. Perhaps that will open your eyes. He entered Dwaraka once, taking advantage of the fact that Balaram and myself were away at Prag-

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Jyotishpur and set fire to the cottages of the innocent Yadavs. All this was done to please Jarasandha, his mentor. That is not all. When the king of Bhoj was holidaying at Raivataka this scum of humanity made a sudden attack and had the Jadavas imprisoned to hand them over as gifts to Jarasandha. No scruple would stop him from raping women if it would please Jarasandha. He did this to the wife of Vabhru. Do you want to hear of more misdeeds? He was going to abduct his own cousin Bhadra taking my disguise. But enough is enough. You have watched his conduct today. He is about to stop a sacred ceremony, the freedom to follow one's own religion is not sacrosanct to him. His fury is now directed against me. I have excused all his misdeeds thinking of his mother, my unfortunate aunt. But all that is in the past. I challenge him in combat."

As he uttered these words a terrible anger transformed Krishna. He looked so frightful that people had to close their eyes in terror, even Sisupal stood patrified, all his erstwhile bravado gone. He stood very still as though under a hypnotic spell. But before his friends—Karushka and other kings could step forward Krishna let go his Sudarshan Chakra, the deadly discus and Sisupal's head rolled to the ground. It happened so swiftly that nobody could realise at first what had happened. In fact they could not believe their eyes—it was so unexpected, so unreal, so unbelieveable that a brave warrior like Sisupal would meet such an end. Those who had forged ahead for help stopped in their track, and fled in terror.

Silence descended on the scene—all were quiet. It was a deadly silence. Nobody dared to move and the proceedings began.

The chanting of the hymns resounded in the otherwise silent hall.

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CHAPTER NINE

The Rajasuya was over. Now it was time for the guests to depart. The five brothers and Krishna had a busy time looking after the arrangements for their safe and comfortable return. That was not all. Those who were not favourably inclined to the Pandavs had to be pacified and treated with special care. Needless to say it was a tiring job and Krishna felt he needed some rest. But when he expressed his desire to return to Dwaraka Yudhisthir insisted that he should stay on for some more time. Krishna could not refuse his good friends. So about a month was spent with the Pandavs after which he set out for home.

He left with a heavy heart. It had been a very long and enjoyable stay, in fact his longest ever with the Pandavs. He kept looking back till finally the tall spires of the royal palace disappeared from view.

Memories haunted him. How could he forget the first meeting at the Swayamvara of Draupadi and the eventful days that followed? The first phase of his plan was successfully completed. But a great deal remained to be done. What he had so far been able to accomplish was to free dharma from the shackles of injustice. But that had not made any dent in the attitude of the people. No real good can come if the minds of the people are not liberated from age old prejudices. At least the Rajasuya was a first step. It opened up the minds of the kings who how realised the world was greater than their kingdoms, that humanity extended beyond the frontiers of their respective states. Here for the first time they were exposed to other cultures, they interacted with languages and traditions not their own, they felt that their own good was linked with a greater good. For each of the participating royalty this was a new experience. It opened their eyes to entirely new possibilities of contact and co-operation which would create an atmosphere of mutual trust. A new political climate would emerge where all would be parts of one extended family. Each individual state would enjoy a measure of security never known before. The outcome stimulated Krishna — he looked forward to the ultimate vision — one Bharata and he was thrilled to the core.

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It seemed to Krishna that success was already within reach. With the change in political leadership an unpleasant phase had ended, giving way to a new period of inter-dependence. The imperialist camps were in disarray. Yet something held him back. One must not underestimate one's opponents.

Indraprastha was way behind him now but its problems continued to haunt him. The spiteful face of Duryodhan floated before his mind's eye – a face distorted with envy. But Krishna had no idea of the tragedy that was to overtake them all eventually.

It was only to teach the boastful Duryodhan a lesson that Krishna had made him distribute the gifts. That the once poor Pandavs had far outstripped the Kauravs in affluence had to be rubbed into him. And it worked. As the eldest of the Kaurav brothers handled the expensive gifts he had an idea not only of the wealth but also of the loyalty and love of the other kings. It was a torture for him to keep up a pretence of friendliness while all the while he was burning with jealousy. Nothing could be more humiliating. He cursed his fate and went on playing the loving brother. His eyes smarted with frustrated agony.

For the first time he realised that the Pandavs were not without support. They could no longer be treated with contempt. They were not only sovereign kings now but others were obliged to pay levy to them. What could be more insulting to the Kauravs than this public acceptance of their superior status?

It seemed to the angry Kaurav that the Pandavs were destined to beat them in everything – they were favoured by the goddess of fortune. Duryodhan gnashed his teeth in fruitless anger. Once he had sent them to their death in the house of lac. But they escaped unhurt. Then they were given a plot of land – wild and uninhabitable infested with ferocious beasts. In no time they cleared the forest and transformed it into a beautiful settlement. Luck always seemed to favour the Pandavs – Duryodhan lamented to his uncle Sakuni who was his friend, philosopher and guide.

A fleeting smile appeared on Krishna's face as he recalled the incidents. But he had overlooked one major factor – Sakuni. He was the one to poison the ears of Duryodhan against his own kith and kin. In fact it was Sakuni who had led the Pandavs to danger more than once. The house of lac was his idea. Pushing the Pandavs to the god-forsaken Khandav forest was another. He was a scheming fellow. He understood human weaknesses only too well and usually succeeded

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in his wicked plans, Krishna in all the elaborate precautions had not taken Sakuni into account. Although he was not likely to strike now, Krishna could not help feeling disturbed. He should have warned the Pandavs. But it was too late now.

But was it really too late? Perhaps there was still time. He could not, after all the trouble he had taken to build the fundations of a new Bharat allow it to be sabotaged by envy – a spark of which he had seen in the eyes of Duryodhan. He thought of going back to Indraprastha. As he looked up a strange sight met his eyes. A chariot coming from the opposite direction sped past him. Krishna felt a tremor in his left limbs – clearly an ominous sign. As if to herald approaching evil ravens fluttered overhead filling the air with their harsh cries. Even the roadside trees seemed to shake with fear. He could hear the pathetic whine of dogs and cats in the distance. What had happened in his favourite city? Krishna was deeply troubled.

As his chariot entered the city he saw signs of devastation everywhere – the houses had been knocked down, people had fled. The teeming city wore the deserted look of a graveyard. His beloved city lay in ruins.

By and by he came to know the whole story. While he was at Indraprastha Shalva had wrought this havoc to match the scores. This was the price of the murder of Sisupal. Young Pradyumna who was in charge could not do anything against Shalva's all-out amphibian attack, an advantage his special Souvi carriage gave him. In trying to defend the city Pradyumna himself was badly injured.

It all came back to Krishna – the way all the kings of the Sisupal faction had run for dear life. Shalva was one of them. But it did not occur to him that he would have the audacity to attack Dwaraka.

It was a well-planned act of vengeance. Shalva had stopped all communication routes and entered the city surreptitiously. What a dastardly revengeance it was – outchering the young and old indiscriminately and abducting the young girls. Dwaraka was not prepared, in fact Krishna had made no arrangement. It was his own negligence for which the Yadavs had to suffer so terribly. Krishna was beyond himself with rage. If he could have that scoundrel before he would crush him to death like pervicious vermin.

Balaram had never seen Krishna lose his balance. He tried to pacify his brother, "Please Krishna, you are excited. Go and lie down. Have a little rest. Then think of a suitable course of action, fight him if you must, But not right now."

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Krishna never disobeyed his brother. So he started towards his room reluctantly. But try as he might peace eluded him. The thought of the thousands of suffering people did not let him rest. How could he relax in the security of his room while cries of the homeless and the tortured went around. He left his room and marched towards the store where weapons were kept.

The followers of Jarasandha were apparently very tough to eliminate. A few are subdued but others soon spring up to take their place, like dangerous weeds. It was in the very nature of imperialism to apply force where it was not necessary. One should never trust them under any circumstances. No time should be wasted, Krishna made up his mind.

What Shalva had done was inexcusable. He had acted and plundered, he had betrayed the trust bestowed on him. His only just punishment was death. Krishna was determined to send him to his death by his own hands.

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The chariot sped swift as air. Krishna was determined to go to the end of the earth looking for Shalva. Heaven and hell resounded, the earth shook as its wheels crunched through. The universe paled in fear, time seemed to stand still as the fight began. But wicked Shalva kept eluding Krishna in his peculiarly equipped vehicle Shauvi which could go through land and water and fly in the air as well. The chase went on relentlessly but Krishna could not get close to him. Shalva was sly as a fox; he had magical powers of a gandharva and he did not care to follow the conventions of warfare. As time went on Krishna grew disheartened. Success seemed beyond his grasp but he hated to admit defeat.

Shalva too was getting weary and tired. In desperation he thought of a plan. He sent one of his Yadav prisoners to Krishna.

Krishna was surprised to find an old man running towards him, shouting "Krishna, Krishna, where are you?" Suddenly he stopped on his tracks, surprised to find Krishna right before him. He could not speak for some time. When he was convinced that he had found whom he was looking for the old man went down on his knees to pay his respects. "Please", he pleaded, "Do not be angry with me. I have broken from Shalva's prison. I have something to tell you but I don't know how to say it."

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He stopped, gasping for breath. He avoided Krishna's eyes. It seemed he was under terrible strain and was frightened for some reason. Presently Krishna's kind glance revived him and the old man burst into tears. Krishna was getting puzzled. The old man spoke again, "My dear sir, it breaks my heart to tell you that Shalva has killed your father".

It was like a bolt from the blue. Everything went blank. Krishna stared, seeing nothing. By and by the import of what the man said sank into his consciousness. Tears streamed down his face. The old man had not stopped sobbing. He went on, "All the Yadav chiefs have been put behind bars. If you do not stop fighting they will be murdered by the crook Shalva." Overwhelmed with grief Krishna said in a hoarse voice, "Fortunately I am free, my sense of duty is still mine. What would a royal position mean to me if I lose all my relatives ?"

He broke down, not finding a way out of the terrible dilemma. Usually he always kept his calm even in the most trying circumstances. I must not lose control of my reason – he kept telling himself. At last with great effort he pulled himself up and tried to look at it more rationally.

So Shalva was using the Yadav chiefs as ransom – that man could go to any length. How he wished his could teach the scum of the earth a lesson. But how ? He had been chasing him all these days. Now if he continued his efforts the Yadav chiefs would be killed and Krishna would be morally responsible for their death. Since they had sent a message something had to be done, at least for their sake. What would happen if he surrendered to the blackmail ? Wouldn't he be reduced to a laughing stock ? What would the Pandavs say ? The pride and the glory of his name would be gone. Krishna wavered between a sense of duty and pride not knowing what to do.

He paced up and down, suddenly a thought struck him. There was something wrong in the news. None of the Yadav chiefs were fighting. How were they taken as prisoners ? The city was well-guarded. It seemed incredible how could Shalva take them. There was a catch somewhere – but no matter how much he tried he could not solve the puzzle.

The rumble of an aircraft overhead made him look up. It was Salva's Sauvi chariot circling the sky. Krishna came out in the open. He saw some object being dropped from the craft – it was a human form tied hand and feet looking exactly like his father Bosudev. The

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waves swallowed it up but the next instant it bobbed up again. On closer inspection it did not seem to be a human body, it looked more like an inanimate object. Krishna's first reaction was one of helpless despair but as soon as he saw through the deception he began to wonder. Why was Salva taking all this trouble? Was he too sceptical of the outcome of the battle? Was he under the impression that this way he would bring Krishna to surrender. He certainly had to learn a lot yet, Krishna would never compromise with the Jarasandha group. He wanted to subdue them – he wanted a total victory.

The air craft was quite close now. Without wasting any time Krishna, now seething with anger let go his deadly discus – the Sudarshan Chakra.

With a resounding clatter the aircraft exploded lighting up the evening sky. The dismembered parts scattered over a wide area. Finally the headless body of Shalva dropped into the ocean. Within the batting of an eyelid the entire operation was over. The leaping waves pounced on the dead body and swallowed it in no time.

Heaving a sigh of relief Krishna said to himself, "This was pre-ordained. I had almost given up hope. But it seems fate came forward and brought the fight to a swift climax. Poor Shalva – an instrument in the hands of fate. So one more loyal friend of Jarasandha is gone."

Evidently pleased he began to smile.

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CHAPTER TEN

While Shalva was keeping Krishna busy Indraprastha was welcoming Bidur, as a messenger from old king Dhritarastra's court. He brought with him an invitation to Yudhisthir to attend the inauguration of the new court hall at Hastinapur. The unexpected visit could not evoke an unmixed delight—in fact the Pandav king had serious misgivings. But he kept his worries to himself and greeted Vidur with all the formalities the occasion demanded.

Usual pleasantaries were exchanged. Vidur answered all the questions with a dead pan face. He said, "My dear Yudhisthir, I come as a representative of the honoured Dhritarastra. The blind king now has a court hall built in the model of Indraprastha. He wants you to open it formally. So he has asked you along with your brothers and relations to come over to take part in the festivities which would also include the intoxicating pleasures of a dice session."

Yudhisthir was flabbergasted. Not only was the invitation unexpected but the offer was quite puzzling. He could sense a foreboding of evil. The memory of the house of lac was still fresh. Perhaps this was a similar trap. But apparently there was nothing suspicious. What was Duryodhan up to now – to what new tricks? Did the game of dice conceal a trap? Why should a game of dice be part of the inauguration ceremony? What did Vidur mean when he mentioned the intoxication of dice. Was the invitation then only for the game—the opening of the hall being just an excuse? After all the clubious a game was hardly a suitable pastime for a true ksatriya. It merely increased tension and creates bad relations. It certainly was not a good decision to associate this wicked game with an opening ceremony. Duryodhan should not have done it. The more Yudhisthir thought of it the less he liked the idea. He could not shake off a premonition of impending disaster.

Bidur could understand what was going on in Yudhisthir's mind. He was also feeling unhappy. It was not possible for the Pandava king to refuse the invitation. Yudhisthir always respected his elders and considered it his sacred duty to comply to their requests. He was undecided about what should be done. The conflict between duty and conscience it could not be resolved easily.

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Bidur was very fond of the honest Pandavs – and always made it a point to help them. In fact it was his timely warning which had saved them from sure death in the house of lac. Another crisis loomed large now. So Vidur said, "My dear son, you are wise. Do what you think best. Never act against your instinct. That cannot lead you to good. You see, the mind has a way of warning you from what is coming."

Lines appeared on the Pandav's forehead. For some time he lay engrossed in deep thought. Vidur's encouraging wards made him look up. He looked sad and grave. Slowly, he said, "Sir, I cannot accept this invitation with pleasure. Yet duty compels me to accept. I cannot make up my mind. I need some time to think."

"Of course, son", Vidur was pleased, "consult Krishna first. After all you never take any major decision without taking him into confidence."

Like a man lost at sea catching sight of the shore at last, Yudhisthir felt all his worries disappear. He was grateful to Bidur for having made that suggestion. "You are right sir", He agreed. "I'll talk it over with Krishna and let you know."

He sent his messanger to Dwaraka. But Krishna could not be contacted. He sent his man again, but he came back without meeting Krishna. Now the eldest Pandava was in a fix. Then he told himself that after all he was a ksatriya and an emperor – it was not in their nature to shirk from danger. Perhaps was making a mountain out of a mole hill. This was a simple matter, why make such a fuss about it?

Without telling anything to his brothers he decided to accept the invitation. It would n't be right to disappoint the old king who must be looking forward to seeing them. It would again be unlike a ksatriya to refuse he challenge of a game of dice. A ksatriya always takes up a challenge regardless of the consequences. At that instant the ksatriya in Yudhisthir led him inexorably to his doom. He lost his sense of judgement, knowing full well what that invitation signified he set out for Hastinapur, as though driven by forces beyond his control.

Needless to say his action seemed strange to his brothers. Yudhisthir, always known for his sanity and wisdom was behaving like a man possessed. Nakul, disturbed at this sudden change sought an answer in astrology. But his calculations made him untrappier still. It seemed misfortune was after them, now it chased them like

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an ominous storm cloud and was soon to overtake them. They were powerless to resist it. So it would be useless to try to stop Yudhisthir. This was destined to happen.

Things moved fast. In quick succession Sakuni won all the games. Yudhisthir lost all his possessions. At last he played with their dear wife Draupadi as stake.

He lost again. Wild with glee the Kauravs dragged her to Court like a common slave girl, forgetting her status as a wife of the royal family. The kings and royalty hostile to the Pandavs were waiting for this opportunity for a long time. Now at long last the tables had turned in their favour. In vengeance they accosted Draupadi with lewd suggestions — the hidden animal in them came out in the open, red in tooth and claw. Worst of them all was who slapped his thigh and made indecent gestures at his own sister-in-law. Nobody uttered a word of protest. Even when Duhsasan pulled her dress the seniors sat still, including Bhisma, the great Vidur, uncle Dhritarastra, the teacher Dron and the five Pandavs. In vain Draupadi appealed for help. No heart were melted, there was no response. The villains laughed at her. The rest of the court watched her degradation in silence.

Driven to the wall, Draupadi now stood up in all her royal magnificence. She sparkled like a sword drawn from its sheath. Her eyes blazed, her lips tightly pressed, she looked so terrifying that many could not bear the sight and closed their eyes.

She made no attempt to stop Duhsasan. But her cold stare was enough to unnerve him. The end of her dress dropped from his hand. Then she spoke, directing her piercing words to the man who was trying to disrobe her. "Keep your hands off me, you crook." She thundered, "Do not pollute my body with your vile touch. You should be ashamed to call yourself a man. In fact none of the people present here deserve to be called men — they are worse than wild animals. They are looking at my female flesh as a beast of prey would watch its victim. The senior and respected elders are no exception, that is why they are not stopping the crook. All right, if you are so keen to have a look at my naked body — you can have your fill —" and Draupadi was about to take off her dress.

A stunned silence followed. It was like a slap on the face of all those who were making leud remarks and enjoying the discomfiture of the Pandav queen. The cold rebuke of her flashing eyes even put the blackest of the villains to shame. The thick-skinned

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brothers Duryodhan and Duhsasan blushed and looked away. Some closed their eyes to avoid embarassment.

At this point the old king intervened. Troubled by the turn of events, fearing a great calamity Dhritarastra proceeded to the scene of humiliation, holding Sanjay's hand. He walked up to Draupadi and pleaded, "My dear daughter, please forgive them – these scoundrels do not know what they are doing. I set you free from your obligations. Go back in all your glory to Indraprastha with your five husbands. God is certain to punish those who have dared to set their hands on you. They will pay very heavily for this."

The strange action of his father infuriated Duryodhan. Luck while had favoured them was being snatched away–all for the unwise action of his father. In spite of all manipulations the Pandavs had emerged as the ultimate winner – and they would always be so. This was more than what the Kaurav prince could take. He cursed his own fate and was very vocal about his dissapointment.

Sakuni was made of different stuff, "Dear nephew", he said, "it does not become you to wail like a common female. Do not give up. Persuade Yudhisthir to play another game. Then just wait for the outcome. They will lose every thing, you can be sure of that. You will have the whole world. Go, talk to your father."

The plan worked. The Pandavs lost again. That one game put a seal on their fate. Now victory was Duryodhan's. Homeless and destitute the Pandavs had to agree to a thirteen year forest exile in forests.

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Krishna in the meantime had returned to Dwaraka after killing Shalva. After he had had a couple of day's rest his wife Rukmini recounted the unfortunate story of the Pandavs.

For a few seconds Krishna stared at her, dumbfounded. It was beyond his wildest imagination, was it really possible? What a terrible irony of fate. The emperor of yesterday turning into a penniless beggar. Yet to think that only the other day Yudhisthir had a treasury which was the envy of the gods, had an army which could conquer the entire country from the Himalayas down to the ocean, had a good name and reputation unparalled in Bharat. It was simply unbelievable.

Thus the glory of the Pandavs turned out to be short lived like

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a sun, which set no sooner it had risen. No, that could not be. Krishna cursed himself for falling a prey to such despair. The sun had not set—he tried to convince himself—it had gone into a temporary eclipse, creating a false impression of darkness. The Pandavs must tide over the difficulties. They had set out on a new adventure to an uncertain future. But then, Krishna was doubtful if there was any glimmer of light at the end of the road. Would the sun rise again?

So, Yudhisthir was not the king any more. All his wealth and power had been usurped by Duryodhan. It broke Krishna's heart to think that the Pandavs had no claim to their throne. Duryodhan got it all without any bloodshed, without any conflict, without having any encounter with the Pandav army. To win a kingdom he did not have to imprison the king. The Pandavs served everything on a platter and left for the forest without a word of protest. A clever tactical move achieved where armed encounter would have failed. That success was so easy to come by was a novel experience to Krishna. Sakuni, the son of Subala must be rejoicing over his victory over Krishna, who was the guiding spirt of Yudhisthir. That blockhead did not know that Krishna always played a ksatriya game—a fair game. He never encouraged foul play or underhand means. A fight always determined who was the stronger of two contesting kings—that was the ksatriya tradition. Sakuni brought a slur on the entire ksatriya community. With his wicked and unconventional ways Sakuni did not deserve the name of a ksatriya. It was his principle to outwit the enemy by hook or by crook.

Principle! Krishna had second thoughts about the application of that word. Were any principle left in the world any more? There used to be an accepted code of ethics in warfare and in politics. But Shalva had acted in clearly violation of that code. So did Sakuni and Duryodhan. The law of the jungle seemed to hold sway. Krishna never wanted politics to sink to such an ugly level. The kind of politics which attracted him was based on moral values and a genuine concern for the people. He liked to take risks but for the sake of a common good. But these people were of a different breed. Their brand of politics was devoid of honesty, commitment or a sense of sacrifice. To what ultimate disaster would this lead them to? They were being driven towards suicide. The whole spectacle was frightening. Destructive methods were needed to counter such evil

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forces. But that would not lead to any good. On the other hand it would only lead to a greater crisis.

Krishna kept his outward calm but uncontrollable emotions surged inside him. In fact he was finding it difficult to keep his cool when he thought of the misfortune of the five brothers – too trusting, too honest, too truthful. It was their vulnerable nature which helped the wicked Duryodhan. The Pandavs lacked the duplicity to match their scheming opponent. They also were not used to false excuses. So they were tricked into defeat. They really could not be blamed for this – the fault lay in their stars.

While attending the Rajsuya Krishna had had ample opportunity of watching Duryodhan from close quarter. He had seen him turn green with envy at the unexpected prosperity of his cousins. He took part in the festivities because he had to, he did it mechnically with no real pleasure. The emotions which took complete hold of him were frustration, anger and humiliation. His expressions revealed what was going on in his mind. On one or two occasions he was subject to some mild ragging, for instance when he had mistaken the crystal floor for a lake and hitched up his clothes before stepping on it. The second was when he actually fell into a lake. It looked so much like a crystal floor that it was really difficult to distinguish. This had evoked laughter from the younger Pandavs. Duryodhan had felt terribly insulted. He thought that it was done deliberately to make him look ridiculous. This was like the last straw. From that moment seeds of discord were sown – it was soon to grow to huge proportions. As an angry Duryodhan left Indraprastha breathing fire and brimstone – the unpolluted atmosphere of the new city had its first taste of poison. Duryodhan would never forget his humiliation and eventually extract a heavy price. Krishna was anticipating this but he had no idea that it would happen so soon.

Somehow there was no inkling of what was going on in his mind from the way the eldest Kaurav had behaved. The secret agents had also not been vigilent – so it seemed. But then even if they had brought some news Krishna was not there to listen to them. He was chasing Shalva all over the country. How cleverly Duryodhan made use of that opportunity to seek vengeance. But, on second thought, it was more than a personal settling of scores. It had a larger meaning – it was part of a larger plan. Soon the answer flashed across his mind. Evidently the imperialist faction of Jarasandha did not relish the idea of a rival power group. Once formed that would be against

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their interest. From the outset they tried their best to thwart the effort as was evident from the open revolt of Sisupal at the Rajsuya ceremony, obviously Duryodhan had conspired with Shalva to curb the increasing influence of Krishna and Yudhisthir on the political scene. The plan to attack the two major constituents – the Yadavs and the Pandavs simultaneously was part of their plan–so as to confine each to his own territory. The surprise attack on Draraka and the invitation to gamble were not isolated events. Both were mastermended by Duryodhan – both the strategies were linked – the methods were different. Force was to be used in one case, deceit in the other. And the outcomes were different. Shalva could not succeed in the long run, but for Duryodhan it was an effortless victory.

What were the real reasons behind the Pandav disaster? Krishna went over the past events and came to the conclusion that it was Sakuni. He was a keen observer. While at Indraprastha he had the opportunity to study the Pandavs and identify their weaknesses. Yudhisthir's passion for gambling was well-known. Sakuni also found out that for all his weakness Yudhisthir was a poor player. In spits of that he never refused a challenge – he took it up readily. That was how Sakuni had hit upon the brillant idea of outwitting the Pandavs.

Sakuni, the Gandhar prince was also aware of the fact that the Pandavs depended on Krishna for every major decision. They were powerless without Krishna. They never did anything without taking his advice. Krishna's pressence made them practically invincible. So a long absence of their friend, philosopher and guide seemed like an excellent opportunity. Duryodhan and Sakuni had timed their attack very cleverly. The more Krishna thought about it the angrier he grew.

It was actually an act of hostility not so much on the Pandavs as such as on Krishna. It was an open declaration of war because going against the Pandav meant going against their Yadav friend whose well-thought plan of forming a non-aligned group was under attack even before it was formed. Angry and disappointed, Krishna convinced himself that his interests were the same as that of the Pandavs. In fact the five brohers were implementing his grand plan of bringing together different warring kingdoms. It was he would had made Yudhisthir the emperor as he was the most suitable person to lead such an alliance. Anybody trying to thwart this effort would be an enemy not only of the Pandavs but also his. He swore eternal vengeance on their common enemy.

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It was his life's mission to destroy the wicked, protect the good and establish a rule of law. The evil Duryodhan was greedy, deceitful, betrayer of a brother's trust. His audacity has crossed the limits. He was becoming unbearable. Now envy has turned him into a veritable monster. Naturally he would have to go the same way as other monsters.

The thought of the defeat of the Pandavas made his heart bled. Actually it was his own defeat because the entire operation was aimed at him. He was their principal target. He would take a terrible revenge, even attack the Kauravs if need be. Determined to strike back he left to meet the Pandavs.

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When the other Yadav chiefs heard of Krishna's intended trip they wanted to go along. They were Bhoj, Vrisni, Andhak and Satwat chiefs and the Panchal prince Dhristaketu with other friends.

After crossing a long and unfriendly terrain they approached the Kamyak forest by the river Saraswati. The chariots came to a halt. With birds chirping, peacocks dancing, deers frisking about it was a perfect pastoral scene. The murmur of the river provided the background music. They could see cottages of sages at a distance. Krishna turned his vehicle to that direction.

The familiar sight of the chariot top brought the five brothers out of the cottage. They were evidently delighted to see Krishna and all other well-wishers and admirers who had taken the trouble of coming all the way. Yet their present condition did not allow them to rejoice. They were embarassed.

Krishna embraced them. The five brothers greeted all the other guests very warmly and took them in. Now instead of the spectacular palace they had a hut and the seats were made of kusa grass. The guests were seated. The five brothers sat round them. It broke Krishna's heart to see the erstwhile princes in this state of misery and hardship. His eyes moist—for a long time he could not speak.

Yudhisthir was burdened by a feeling of guilt. He could not look up at Krishna. Bhim wanted to say something but emotion chocked his voice. Even Arjun's lack-lustre eyes seemed to beg forgiveness.

Silence descended on the scene—everybody kept quiet. It was like a vast silence of the forest outside. One could even hear the

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flutter of the eyelashes. It was an unprecedented situation—nobody knew where to look or what to say.

Krishna was the first person to break the silence. Every pore of his body seemed to exude anger. Intense hatred for the Kauravs distroy the world. Yudhisthir was scared even to look at him.

"Listen, children of Pandu! Krishna thundered, "A limit has been reached. Mother earth cannot endure any more. The blood of Duryodhan, his brothers and Sakuni would flow. I'll not be at peace till I have shed their blood. I swear before you that I'll not stop till the wicked are destroyed and Yudhisthir restored to his throne".

Changing his tone he looked at the Pandav brothers, "Come on. No time is to be lost. Let us get ready to destroy the enemy."

This startling announcement unnerved the eldest Pandav. Even Arjun was little taken aback. Only Bhim gave the proposal a heavy cheer but the others were at a loss.

Desperately Arjun tried to hold him back, "Please, listen to me Krishna". He pleaded, "Being our friend and well-wisher you cannot do this. We are promise-bound. We can't start a war now. That will amount to a breach of promise. You are a good friend, you have been our saviour in the past. How can you of all people lead us astray, away from the path if virtue? Think of your reputation too. We rather prefer the hardship of this exile than forsake virtue. We must not act in an impulse and do what is morally wrong. After all you are our friend, can your friends go against the dictate of dharma?"

Krishna was ashamed of his earlier outburst. "You are right, my dear friend", he said in a more matter of fact tone. "I had lost all sense of control and reason. It was a temporary lapse. But thanks to your timely reminder. I have realised the folly of what I was about to do. I must say you are truly noble. In my excitement I had forgotton that our fates are linked together, very well then, let us wait. Then when the time is ripe."

Krishna controlled himself with great effort because the present state of the Pandavs was more than he could bear. He bit his lips and said—"and then I'll make them pay. They'll have to pay very heavily. I'll not have a moments peace till I have wiped them out from the face of the earth."

He looked at the princes now in a penniless state. For a long time he did not speak. Then he sighed! "Perhaps this was destiny.

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Destiny wants to test you. Nobody can do anything about it—not even me."

Arjun tried to cheer him. "Don't be disheartened my friend," he said. "Thirteen years would pass in no time. Then we will go back to our dream city, we will get back our kingdom."

Bhim who had been a silent spectator could not restrain himself any longer. When they talked of the decree of fate he protested, "Impossible! we won't survive the exile. Thirteen years is a long time."

Yudhisthir interrupted, "But remember, dharma is above everything."

It had the effect of throwing fat into the fire. Bhim roared, "Dharma? Did you say dharma? What is dharma if I may ask? It is different things to different people. It depends on how you interpret it. Think of what happened at the gambling sesson, when a distressed Draupadi challenged the dharma of the seniors of the Kuru clan? They had no answer, not even the great Bhisma or the virtuous Vidur. And you dear brother? You too did not lift a finger because your dharma held you back. Why did you not act—none of you? Because of your idea of dharma. So you see, dharma is like a many splendoured thing. It is also uncertain as a concept, subject to contradictory interpretations. It might also provide a supporting argument to actions of a different nature."

This sudden outburst from the normally reticent Bhim took every one by surprise. The bold ideas put forth by him were equally amazing. Bhim paused, then carried away by his own flow went on, encouraged by the admiring glances of Krishna, Yudhisthir and Arjun.

"We are ksatriyas after all", he said. "Our dharma is to rule, exert force, be brave and courageous; not to hide in the out-skirts of a forest. That kind of life is unbecoming for a ksatriya. He must face the enemies in open combat and destroy the evil-doer which cannot be brought about by sticking to the path of dharma and morality. So act now my dear brother. If we have Krishna, king Drupad and other friends with us we can get back our lost kingdom. So jump into action, my dear brother and bring glory to your ksatriya identity."

But his impassioned speech had no effect on Yudhisthir. "That is hardly possibly my dear brother," he replied placidly. "We cannot go back on our word. We have to wait for thirteen years."

Bhim was not pleased. "Your majesty," he said bitterly, "Your obsession with dharma has made you weak and spineless or you would

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not have talked of a thirteen year wait. Wisemen would tell you that one day of abject misery equals one year so why can't we calculate thirteen years to be compressed into thirteen days?"

An unruffled Yudhisthir replied in a mechanical tone. "One must not act rashly propelled by a feeling of pride. Think of all the pros and cons before embarking on a major venture."

Krishna was wholly in agreement, "Yes Bhim, he is right. The time is not right. Do not underestimate your opponents. Besides many of the pro-Jarasandha kings were not pleased to acknowledge your sovereignty. They were obliged to pay levy but at heart they do not have friendly feelings towards you. If you plunge into war they are sure to take advantage of your family disunity. Duryodhan will join hands with them further strengthening the alliance. Remember, they are not likely to accept the Yadav-Pandav axis. Do not force them to act on the defensive. It will put your very existence at stake not to speak of any future plan of unification. The scene is pretty complicated now—it is better to stay away."

Bhim, in obvious frustration began rubbling his forehead but made no answer.

While this exchange was going on Draupadi waited by the door, hoping to talk to Krishna. Krishna's words were like cool water to the thirsty—his company was soothing and delightful. At that moment Draupadi needed someone like him to whom she could confide.

Krishna's eyes met hers. She signalled him to come in. As Krishna entered he had a better look. He was in for a shock. Nothing remained of that exquisite beauty. She had dark patches under her eyes. In a short time she had been through so much! It was written all over her tired face.

Krishna was too stunned to speak. He just stared at her wondering if it was the same princess who was born out of a sacrificial fire—a woman of stunning beauty.

Draupadi's eyelids were heavy. She did not take her eyes off Krishna.

Krishna was visibly moved, "My dear friend—" he began.

Draupadi turned her face away. "Do not call me that. I have nobody in the world, neither husband, father, brother or anyone to call my own. Not even you Krishna."

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. But she was standing with her back to Krishna. When she turned towards him again, her eyes were dry. She had recovered. Now it was a different woman who

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challenged Krishna – a woman whose fiery eyes sparkled with hatred, a spirit of vengeance shook her limbs. "Shame on Yudhisthir, the greatest of the Pandavs. Shame on the powerful Bhimsen. Shame on Arjun and his deadly bow Gandiv. They were my husbands – out what kind of protectors do they call themselves when they could not do anything to save their wife from the ultimate dishonour, oh! how I suffered! My dear Krishna – was all this destined to happen? None of the Kaurav elders stirred from their seats when Duhsasan brought me dragging to the court, when his elder brother joined him in making me an object of ridicule. Even when the second brother pulled at my dress I pleaded. But they turned a deaf ear. None of the people felt they had a duty, oh no, they would have thought so if they were man enough. They sat tight, a bunch of effeminate slobs, enjoying the scene, hoping to see me disrobed by that scoundrel. None left the hall in protest even. How could they leave such an interesting spectacle– lust oozing out of their eyes. And to think they were all my family members. I am ashamed to say I am the wife of the Pandavs."

Krishna listen to her heart breaking tale, his eyes grew moist. Tenderly he said, "Dearest sister, please do not lose heart. This was in your fate against which no mortal has any power. People are only puppets in the hands of fate. But the wicked people who have insulted you will get their just punishment. Mark my words Draupadi –one drop of tear from your eyes would be the cause of oceans of tears, from the eyes of hundreds of Kaurava eyes – if that is any consolation. Keep your spirits up my dear. You will again be the queen, reigning over the entire country."

It had a wonderful effect. Draupadi smiled; "But then I'll have to wait for a very long time. All these years I'll have to live with the memory of my humiliation. Why can't we cut the time short? As Bhim said priests can modify instructions depending on the circumstances. Let us treat one year as one month–so in thirteen months the exile would be over. If that entails any sin we can appease the gods by the appropriate sacrifices and gifts."

Krishna smiled indulgently. "No. my dear, that can't be done. I would have advised such a course if it was feasible."

"But why not?" retorted Draupadi angrily, "Do you want me to be unhappy for thirteen years, go on nursing my grudge?"

"I have every sympathy for you. But you are an intelligent woman Draupadi. It was god's will."

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"Thank you very much, but I do not need your sympathy, neither your pity." Draupadi was hurt.

Krishna gave her an affectionate smile. But his smile soon faded away as he tried to explain, "you are a king's daughter and an empress as well. You do have some idea of the intricacies of politics. The Pandavs have lost all their resources. Under the circumstances it is practically impossible for them to exert the same kind of political pressure devoid as they are of their source of power. After all a dethroned king is not much different from an ordinary man in the street. The Pandavs have been reduced to the status of commoners, the same Pandavs whose wealth and fame had been an object of envy to all the kings. Duryodhan will try to exploit that envy in mobilising forces against them. The present situation is not favourable for you; You will have to prepare secretly and wait for a suitable opportunity. Your husbands have a lot to think of now and a lot of work too. The virtuous Yudhisthir will get back his kingdom eventually but the process will not be easy. It will call for a lot of sacrifice. Bear with them till then, my dear. It would be your duty to help and inspire them."

From outside the hut agitated voices could be heard. It seemed Bhim was still arguing—he could be heard speaking at the top of his voice. Both Krishna and Draupadi hurried out.

True enough it was Bhim—fuming and fretting like a lion shut in a cage. His shouts echoed through the forests, scaring even the animals. The dears scampered away, the birds moved to a safer perch on the tree tops.

Angry and furious Bhim went on charging his eldest brother who listened with downcast eyes. Even Arjun made no attempt to intervene.

At last Yudhisthir made a feeble attempt to justify his action. "I deserve your harsh words my dear brother. I have brought such misery on you. But believe me I agreed to the game because I wanted to win over Duryodhan's kingdom and send them to exile."

The others heard this in stunned silence. Of course, it could not be true. They could not imagine their good brother harbouring such evil schemes. But even if they did not believe they did not tell him so to his face. Bhim was silent. Draupadi looked passive. The two younger brothers closed their eyes. Krishna threw a look of pity at Yudhisthir—he felt sorry that he had to give such a pathetic excuse. Only Arjun, unable to bear it any longer blurted out, "Sir, you do not

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know what you are saying—so intense is your remorse. Such words do not become you. We all know this is a lie. We know you cannot sink so low. We hold you in very high esteem, you know that."

These words of sympathy only succeeded in increasing Yudhisthir's anguish. In a voice chocked with emotion he said, "How can I forget that you are suffering for my reckless action. You are paying for my mistake. Let Bhim pour all his invectives on me—I deserve it."

His words touched all the people present. There was nothing to be said. They all looked sad and dejected. Only Bhim stared at his elder brother infuriated, his nostrils flared. Sensing the general sympathy Draupadi burst out, picking up from where Bhim had left off. She did not have any consideration for the man who had brought them to this state. "I agree with Bhim", she said her sharp words meaning to hurt Yudhisthir. "You and your dharma! your dharma has made a jelly-fish out of you, taking away all the ksatriya virtues of bravery, initiative and pride. And pray, what has your dharma given you except bad luck and misery, taken you from one forest-exile to another. If this is what dharma has for you I would not touch it with a ten foot pole. Why should we sacrifice all we have for upholding it. With all his unethical action Duryodhan is prosperous. He has always been fortunate without the help of dharma. He has increased his wealth, influence and circle of friends. And you with all your fixation for dharma are losing all becoming destitutes. Excuse my saying so, Maharaj, but my humble suggestion is wrench good fortune by exerting your effort. The best dharma for a man is the dictates of his manhood. But where is that virile strength in you so that you can stand up and declare look here, here is a man who has two arms are the mighty Bhim and Arjun whose counsellor is Krishna. Believe me Sir, you can conquer the whole world with these three lieutenants."

Her spirited speech had no effect on Yudhisthir. He remained as unruffled as ever, "But my darling," he replied quietly, "No work should be done in a troubled and boastful spirit, or in a hurry and most of all with an idea to take revenge. It achieves the opposite result."

More incensed than ever Bhim cut in sarcastically, "This will do, thank you, we have had enough of your moral instructions. You should not have been born in a ksatriya family in the first place. You are a king emperor not a world renouncing hermit. Your dharma is to

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govern. Statesmanship should be uppermost in your mind. Politics thrives on diplomacy, strategy and clever manipulation. Do not confuse the religion of the holy man with that of the king. It will only cloud your vision and encourage cowardice."

Pushed to a corner, the eldest Pandava made one last appeal. "Believe me, I want your good," He said miserably "How can I forget that I am a monarch over a large territory, ruling over a people whose prosperity is my prime concern like any honest and virtuous king."

"Very well then", Draupadi came forward to support him. "Then you have to follow the dharma expected of a king, punish the wicked, keep him in check. If you are lenient then the wicked would be bold and indulge in anti-social activities, become a nuisanse to all. Why do you hesitate to restrain him ?"

Bhim, still displeased was bent on hurting his brother. He said, "He is hesitating because he cannot make up his mind. But Maharaj, remember there is no place for affection or personal or personal factor in politics – nothing call just. One must devise crooked ways to deal with the crooked."

He paused to pull himself together. "I am sorry, but whenever I think of Draupadi's humiliation something breaks inside me. I lose all control. I am surprised that you have no feeling for her, no pity. You think only of yourself not how to make good her loss. What are you scared of, you worthless lump of flesh ?"

Trying to provoke the Pandav even further Draupadi asked, "There is another point maharaj, Suppose your subordinate kings want to know about their security, the subjects demand some arrangement for their safety how are you going to answer them, what kingly duty prompted you to forsake them ? Does your rajdharma permit such eccentric behaviour ? Have you not committed an act of sin already by abandoning your subjects ?"

She paused to watch her husband's reaction. Bhim picked up the thread of argument. "Under the circumstances", he explained, "if we attack the Kauravs we wo'nt be in the wrong. On the other hand it is certainly wrong to forsake your people, your subjects. You are acting in a wilful manner – is that permitted by dharma ? The scriptures have provision for atonement. If you think you have gone against the path of virtue you can observe penance as permitted by the scriptures. Besides, as I said before we have already spent our thirteen years, counting one year as equal to a day."

But in spite of such provocative words Yudhisthir remained un-

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perturbed. He thought he deserved such charges. As he listened he grew firmer in his determination, "No matter what you say you cannot budge me from the path of truth." He declared firmly.

All along Krishna had been a patient listener. He waited. He knew that Bhim and Draupadi would let off steam and then cool down. Krishna was well-versed in human psychology. One must give vent to pent up feelings to be purged of all passions. Everything happened as he had anticipated. At last when their anger had run its course he spoke to Bhim, "Please try to understand the position of your eldest brother. He cannot act on an impulse as suggested by you. Because the fortunes of too many in fact that of the entire nation depend on his decision. He must take each step with caution after a great deal of thought. True he has made a mistake, but he is not to be blamed. It was in his stars. It does not become a loyal brother like you to be so rude. Please apologise to him, do not waste your energy in vain boasts. And rude impolite behaviour creates distance, ill feeling is created. It only helps the enemy. After all you are intelligent. I am amazed at you. Besides there is a proper time for everything. Try to see reason, Bhim."

Then he turned to Draupadi who was still fuming with rage, "My dear, I do not know what to say to you. Nothing can put a balm on your bleeding heart. The entire country will be in flames because the injustice done to you is so great. A great conflageration —I can visualise it—a catharsis, a purification. Evil has to reach a breaking point before it exholders. In the first encounter between virtue and vice, vice has the first round. But in the long run virtue always wins. You know our mythical heroes—Ram and Harish Chandra had to undergo immense pain—all for the sake of truth.

"Listen to me, you the sons of Kuru", He went on after a pause, "We have bad days ahead of us. For reasons of safety we must keep moving so that the enemy does not find out our whereabouts. Do not stay in one place for very long. But keep in touch with friends. Let them know about the deceit, the evil scheme, the jealousy of the Kauravs. Bid your time but proceed in a planned way."

As Bhim and Draupadi watched him their anger faded. A feeling of contentment took hold of them. Krishna too observed the change in them. It pleased him exceedingly.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The days of the exile were coming to a close. Only a few days were left for the Pandavs to come out in the open from their secret hiding place. Krishna was on edge all the time. As the time drew nearer his apprehensions grew. He fidgeted the whole day, spent sleepless nights. At every instant he expected a messenger to arrive, and he kept wondering what kind of news he would bring.

He was so restless that he felt no desire to talk to any one, even to his most favourite wife Rukmini. Of course Rukmini was sensible enough to understand the state of her husband's mind and did not complain.

It was the last day of the exile. Krishna kept pacing to and fro in his chamber. The soft and inviting bed made by Rukmini herself seemed like a bed of nails. At the slightest noise he jumped up and kept staring blankly at the water clock. He looked so miserable and confused that even Rukmini was a little puzzled. She had never seen her husband act that way before. She got up, crept close to her husband and touched him lightly on the back. Krishna turned back to look at her lovely smiling face. She spoke softly, almost to herself. "The sky is slowly turning red. Soon the sun will appear. The birds have started chirping before taking flight. The darkness will go and with it all your worries. If nothing happens before sunrise – the Pandavs would come out of their hiding in the morning."

Her words impinged on Krishna's consciousness. He seemed to wake up. "You are right", He said, "with the darkness about to go, the birds are leaving their hide outs. It is time too for the Pandavs to leave the shelter of King Virat and be on their own."

"Very well then," smiled Rukmini, "Let us get ready for a journey to the kingdom of Virat."

There was something in that smile which aroused her husbands' desire. He took her in his arms, his lips thirsty for a touch of her lips. Rukmini succumbed to his passion.

When the rays of the morning sun gently touched the loving couple on the bed they were looking at one another with perfect contentment.

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Suddenly Krishna sat up. From the window he could see a man on horseback rushing towards them. As he came closer Krishna recognised him – he was one of his trusted informers. He summoned him to come in. The man came gasping and panting. He was in great haste. Obviously the news was not good.

The spy, Kuntak by name was one of Krishna's favourites and one of the most loyal. Krishna was particularly fond of him and treated him as a member of the family. His present job was to follow the Pandavs about, to shadow them wherever they went. This he had been doing very cleverly, changing his disguise all the time so that the Pandavs were not aware of his presence. When the five brothers had set up their temporary home at Dwaita forest Kuntak kept hovering in the vicinity dressed as a hunter. Through him Krishna came to know of Duryodhan's latest game. The Kauravs had set up camp at the same forest apparently for hunting but actually it gave then the vicarious pleasure of watching the Pandavs in their misery. The entire Kaurav household took part in the outing, including Karna and Sakuni. Even the wives had accompanied them. Annoyed with them Chitrasen, the Gandhara king attacked them and held the entire party as his prisoner. The wail of the Kaurav women had drawn the Pandavs there. In spite of the fact that Chitrasen acted purely out of his friendly feelings for the Pandavs and wanted to teach Duryodhan a lesson the five brothers were angry. They set the prisoners free much to the astonishment of their well-wisher Chitrasen. In the Pandav code of conduct dishonour to the women of their clan was a more serious issue. For the time being all desire of vengeance was blown to the wind. Kuntak related the entire episode to Krishna in great detail. Like Chitrasen, Krishna too marvelled at the magnanimity of the five brothers.

That morning however Kuntak was less exuberent. He saluted and stood silent before his master.

"Is everything all right Kuntak?" Krishna enquired.

Kuntak hesitated before speaking, "Yes, sir, there is no cause for concern yet. The Pandavs are safe; but –"

He stopped to get back his breath. Krishna watched his face with growing apprehension. "Go on, Kuntak. You make me nervous. Tell me, how are the Pandavs?"

Kuntak smiled, but without pleasure. Then he announced, "Duryodhan has brought a huge army to the frontier of Virat's territory. He has all the stalwards with him – Bhisma, Dron, Karna,

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Aswatthama, Sakuni and the rest. They are waiting for daybreak when they plan to take away the vast wealth of cattle. I have come rushing to inform you of this. Can I go and have some rest now ?"

Krishna asked him to withdraw, Kuntak bowed and left.

This was indeed a very strange development. Krishna felt totally at sea. The period in which they were to live incognito was just over. Why was the attack timed in this manner ? Did that mean Duryodhan had come to know of their whereabouts ? The stealing of the cattle was just an excuse. The idea was to take the Pandavs by surprise. Ungrateful man ! How could he forget the incident at the Dwarta forest so soon ? To what depths of degradation could that man descend !

Krishna knew that spies were engaged to bring news of the Pandav. The well-trained Kaurav informers had combed forests and hills, towns and cities, valleys and deserts in search of the five brothers but with no result. They seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Krishna had spread the rumour of their death – just to mislead the Kauravs. But they were not convinced, particularly Bhisma and Dron. Duryodhan announced prizes on their heads. Perhaps greed for gold would work when everything else failed. But nobody could bring any news of them. Were they really dead then, as Krishna would have the world believe ? If Duryodhan took them to be dead then the secret attack to the Virat state did not make sense. Why did they choose the day when the exile was coming to an end ? Krishna was unable to fathom their motive. Do not leave the last trace of the enemy – he remembered the warning uttered by Sakuni. But who was the enemy in this case ? The Pandavs or the Virat king who had already made several forays into Hastinapur and wrought havoc on the innocent citizens. Recently the murder of the army general Kichak in the hands of Bhim had considerably weakned the kings military strength and the king himself was busy fighting the Trigarta army. The time was convenient for Duryodhan to strike in order to settle old scores. At the same time a blow to the power of the mighty Matsya kingdom would make it easier for him to intimidate the neighbouring states. They would be afraid to go against the Kauravs. That would be a definite political gain which had nothing to do with the Pandavs. Perhaps it was a mere coincidence that this day happened to be the day of their emergence from exile.

As Krishna came to this conclusion a great load was off his mind. Strange are the ways of fate – he said to himself. Otherwise why

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should they have to plunge into action the moment they were going to divulge their identity? Now they would be compelled to give a show of their strength through which the world know that they were no ordinary warriors.

Neither the king of Matsya nor Duryodhan had any knowledge of the whereabouts of the Pandavs. They had no idea that the Pandavs were serving the Virata king. Now the kingdom was more or less unprotected as the king was busy warding off the Trigartas. So the Pandavs would be forced to come out, defending the kingdom. They will be obliged to shed their disguise and emerge as warriors in their true identity.

Meanwhile Arjun had acquired a lot of divine weapons during the course of his twelve year sojourn. Duryodhan would have a test of these god-gifted weapons in the open combat. It would be an experience he was not likely to forget.

Like a true artist god had chosen such a moment—the Kauravas would meet their arch enemy in a surprise encounter. Chance had played an important part in the eventful career of the five sons of Pandu, most of which had no rational explanation.

Rukmini was feeling left out. Krishna was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he did not even notice her presence. In vain did she try to divert his attention. At last, trying to hold back her tears she asked, "What was the message my dear? Wouldn't you let me share your thoughts?"

Krishna looked at her. His face softened, the lines from his forehead disappeared. Embarassed he tried to soothe her hurt pride. "Oh It's you, my dear wife!" He touched her lovingly on the neck and gave her a long penetrating look. "Do you know what? Politics in Bharat is now at the cross roads. A new turn is eminent. But the look of things scare me. The way the Pandavs are coming out of their exile indicate a very ominous turn of events, yet they are left with no other alternative but fight for their lost right and glory. This power struggle will envelop the entire land, bringing untold misery to millions of people. But it can't be helped. Injustice against the Pandavs has piled up till a breaking point is reached—a bloody war will ensure. That will be a terrible tragedy but it is inevitable. The scores have to be settled at an exceedingly high price. The war will involve a lot of unpleasant things which I do not want. But it can't be helped. When virtue is assaulted the wrath of the gods come

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down on us. After a great massacre a new Bharat will emerge, like phoenix from the fire. Only I won't be lucky enough to witness it."

Rukmini's eyes were wide with wonder. Frightened, she said, "What do you mean my darling? I have never heard of such terrible things."

Krishna went on nonchalantly, "The Jarasandhas of this world do not die. They are forced to lie low for some time."

Bewildered, Rukmini asked, "You are talking riddles. I can't follow you my dear."

"You won't, my queen. The intricacies of politics are not for you to fathom. Duryodhan thinks he is a second Jarasandha, although he lacks his brain and might. Propelled purely by greed, inflated by vainglory Duryodhan dreams of conquering the whole world. Conquest of the wealthy Virat kingdom would intimidate the neighbouring states. That is what he thinks in his blind pride. Little does he know that power does not flow from a mere clash of arms. The real combat is on a more personal level, between individuals, between policies. The actual game begins when a war of wits heats up the political scenerio. That is why it is very important to build up secret tensions. Poor imbecile Duryodhan is blissfully unaware of such strategies."

Rukmini was beginning to understand. "But the open combat is also necessary, isn't it?" She suggested. "That can create terror. It is out in the open, for everyone to see and assess the strength of the contending parties."

"You are right my dear", said Krishna, "A new element of tension has been brought in by Duryodhan with his huge army, his dependent warriors all of whom are well known for their skill. All the other states stand in awe of him. For all you know he might even attack our Yadav republic. But luck will not favour him. He will be caught in the web of his own making. It is an inexorable path — leading to his ruin."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Kuntak, the prize informer had an interesting way of relating his experiences. If Krishna could spare the time he loved to listen to his stories of adventure and excitement.

He was describing the fateful day when after thirteen years of exile the Pandavs were ready to come home. On that very day the Kauravs along with the Trigarta king Susharma decided to raid the Matsya territory to take away their prize cattle. After a fierce battle king Virata was defeated and imprisoned in the hands of Susharma. His soldiers ran helter-skelter. Something had to be done to save king Virata. Bhim rushed to his rescue. He uprooted a tree and went after Susharma. Yudhisthir sensed trouble. He rushed to Bhim to stop him. "Don't do it", he said, "If you chase with an uprooted tree they will at once recognise you. We should play safe. In my opinion it would be better to attack with conventional weapons."

Bhim laughed, "Dear brother, I find a tree to be a more convenient weapon. You need not worry. Let them recognise me, let them know that we are alive. It would give me the greatest pleasure to scare them, to give them sleepless nights. We need not be afraid of them."

o o o

Meanwhile a messenger from the court of king Virat arrived in Dwaraka. He bowed to Krishna and handed him a letter. It was from Yudhisthir.

For no reason Krishna had forebodings of danger. He took the letter but before opening it looked at the messenger's face searchingly. But his blue eyes, his passive countenance did not register any danger. Krishna opened the letter and read on.

After the usual formalities the eldest Pandav had explained the purpose of the letter. In his own word.

"God has given us an wonderful opportunity which coincides perfectly with our coming out. We consider it a great blessing and

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wish to make full use of this chance; you could call it a great moment of our life.

"Perhaps you are not aware of what has happened. Duryodhan and the Trigarta king Susharma had planned to steal the entire cattle of the Matsya king. A most peculiar plan – to say the least. The king was taken captive by Susharma. To cut a long story short their effort was foiled by us – the five Pandavs. Duryadhan and Susharma had to beat a most inglorious retreat. In gratitude king Virat has given us an offer of kinship. He wants to marry his daughter Uttara to Arjun's son Abhimanyu – your nephew. We too want to pay back his hospitality and welcome the proposal. But we are waiting for your consent. So please take the present situation into consideration and let us know."

As Krishna read the letter with bated breath a smile twisted his lips. His expressions betrayed the various emotions of surprise and pleasure which the letter generated. His handsome face glowed with happiness.

Unable to hold himself any longer he called the messenger who was close by. He promptly appeared before him, saluted and waited for his orders. Krishna meanwhile was scanning the letter and smiling to himself. Without looking up he said. "Go and ask Subhadra to see me. Be quick."

The news that a messanger had arrived from Matsya had already reached Subhadra. Subhadra was not as lucky as Draupadi who constantly followed her husbands about, sharing their misery. All Subhadra could do was to keep worrying about the Pandavs roaming about in the forests while she was living a comfortable life in the palace. She spent sleepless nights but there was nothing she could do. Even since their period of exile was over she had been anxious to hear a word about them. But no news came. Naturally the arrival of the messenger had brought her promptly to Krishna's chamber. But she had entered quietly and was waiting for her brother to finish reading the letter.

The messenger saw that she was in the room. He did not know what to do. Subhadra in order to help him blurted out. "But your sister is already here, brother, at your service", she tried to cover up her embarassment.

Krishna was still savouring the contents of the letter. Subhadra's voice brought him back to the present. Still in a daze he exclaimed, "Wonderful! This is really wonderful."

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He turned to his sister. "Oh I see! So you were here. Here have a look." He handed her the letter. While she went over the letter Krishna's mind went back to the past, to the wedding day of Arjuna and Draupadi. That was an important alliance. This one would also forge very strong ties and would have significant political consequences. In many ways the two matches were similar – the difference was only of place and time. Otherwise it was history repeating itself. In each case the marriage took place after the forest exile, signifying an auspicious moment. In each case they earned the patronage of a powerful monarch – a fact which was to prove fruitful in getting back their lost honour. It indeed was a strange coincidence.

Did the letter contain a hidden message – Krishna began to ponder. He tried to read between the lines. Obviously there would be some political undertone – the letter could not be as simple as it looked.

Grouping and re-grouping of power blocs had always been a nagging problem, in the country's political scene. None of the heads of state followed any principle – they were all opportunists of the greatest order. The weaker and selfish ones tended to flock to the power which assumed importance, forgetting previous hostilities overnight. Krishna knew their weaknesses only too well. He had their good and bad points in his fingertips through his own well-organised information system which ran efficiently under the charge of Kuntak. This channel supplied him news very regularly regarding possible adversaries, who they were and what were their strategies. Perhaps Yudhisthir had this information system in mind and he wanted Krishna's help and advice in preparing the list of invitees. "Taking the present situation into account" those were his words which clearly emphasised the political advantages of the proposed marriage. Krishna was to take this into account before deciding on a course of action. But would that be advisable, wondered Krishna. Using the wedding ceremony to gain political mileage would only create enemies. Such thoughts were contradictory to Yudhisthir's passive nature. He was merely complicating a basically simple issue.

Suddenly a thought flashed across his mind. Of course the marriage would pose a threat to Duryodhan's supremacy which had passed on to him effortlessly after the Pandav's lost their kingdom. But how far he was equipped for that position has not yet been put to test. The re-emergence of the Pandav's would alter the scenario.

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Judged from this angle the union of Uttara and Abhimanyu was going to be a political event of great importance. The news of this marriage would automatically announce the existence of the Pandav's. Thus a crisis would be imminent among Duryodhan and his followers. The fence-sitters would be compelled to take a stand. The strength of the Pandavs alliance could be assessed from the number of kings who would attend the wedding.

With his wisdom and foresight Yudhisthir had packed so many questions into one innocent looking sentence — 'taking the present situation into account'. What it all amounted to in simple language was to assess the present political scene before making any policy decision.

The picture was different when Draupadi chose Arjun as her husband. The five brothers had only the Kauravs as adversaries, nobody else. Neither was their influence as far-reaching as it was now. But the Rajasuya had created a number of enemies. Many were compelled to accept their dominance through fear or defeat. They would be planning a revenge now and rally under the Kaurav flag. Many of them were particularly allergic to Krishna and their hatred for Krishna would spur them on to join Duryodhan to form a new alliance. A new political initiative would begin to crush the Pandavs, to settle old scores.

All these thoughts flashed across Krishna's mind and then faded by the time Subhadra had finished reading the letter. She looked up to him, not knowing what to say. The contents of the letter had taken her completely by surprise. She was keen to know her brother's reaction. But Krishna had a far away look, as though he was a being from another planet beyond the reach of mortal men. Subhadra was suddenly scared. Although she knew her brother well, knew that he was very different from others yet she failed to understand why such a simple letter would plunge him into deep thought. Hesitantly she called him, "My dear Partha!"

It seemed like a call from across the milky way — and Krishna drew himself up with effort. "Yes?" He responded.

Her sister, sick with worry replied, "You have to take the decision. You are a ksatriya warrior after all. Do not be needlessly worried. What do I understand about society and politics, whatever you think best will be acceptable to me."

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Her words borught Krishna back to the present. 'Yes, of course' he said and sat down to write a reply.

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Invitations were sent to all parts of the country. Krishna had instructed that no king even belonging to the farthest parts should be left out. He had also stressed in his letter about providing the best hospitality to the guests.

Within a very short time provisions were made for housing the kings with their entourage. Separate lodgings were built for their companions, courtiers and servants – stable were put up for horses. camps were set up for relations and others important invitees.

The guests started pouring in – friends, relations, royal guests. The city wore a festive look. Looking after the guests was Uttar, the prince ably supported by the two younger Pandavs Nakul and Sahadev.

Two days before the wedding Krishna the uncle of the groom set out for the city of Virat taking the groom Abhimanyu, the groom's mother Subhadra, Balaram and a host of other relations with them. Representatives of the other clans – Andhak, Vrisni, Bhoj, Satwat also accompanied them. A huge contingent reached the kingdom of Matsya.

The chariot reached the gateway to the city, led by the infantry, flanked by an army of elephants. Women and members of other clans came up next, the cavalry brought up the rear. In the central part of the colourful procession sat Abhimanyu in a magnificent chariot with his mother and uncle.

As soon as the groom's party was sighted the women blew conch shells to announce their arrival. Shouts filled the air, the musicians began to play, flower petals and garlands were flung in the air.

King Virat proceeded to welcome the honoured guests. He helped them alight from the chariots, embraced them and folded his hands in polite greeting. The women of the royal household received the women guests. Draupadi still in her disguise never left the queen Sudarshana and helped her in looking after the guests. She introduced Subhadra and the other ladies to the queen. The queen took them to the inner palace, Draupadi following them.

The ritual of blessing the groom began with the chanting of hymns. A Brahmin priest put the auspicious red sandalwood paste

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mark on his forehead, put grains of paddy and durba grass on his head and kissed him fondly. All the seniors blessed the groom. King Virat kissed his head and placed a gold necklace decked with nine jewels round his neck. Uttara carried the groom from the chariot to a specially made bejewelled cart as was the custom. He was then taken to the wedding hall.

Virat showed Krishna around. He took him everywhere in order to show the elaborate arrangements. Finaly he took him to the marriage pavillion which was aesthetically so charming that it compared favourably with king Drupad's Swayamvara hall of a generation ago.

But in this pomp and pagentry the Kauravs were conspicuous by their absence. Neither Bhisma, Dron, Kripa or Vidur were there. Among the other notable absentees were Kritavarma of Bhoj, Sudakshina of Kamboj, King Nil of Mahishmati, Vindu of Avanti, Satyaratha of Trigarta, Brihadwal of Kosala, Bhagadatta of Prag-Jyotish and Jayadratha of Sindhu. This however did not surprise Krishna in the least. On the other hand the faint signals of hostility pleased him. All of them belonged to the Jarasandha faction and had been against Yudhisthir from the start. Unscrupulous men like them should not be depended upon. They were double-edged serpents who betrayed friends, backstabbed the patrons they appeared to be loyal to. They were only propelled by selfish motives, neither their sacrifice nor their friendship could be trusted. One should give these people a wide berth. So in a way their refusal to attend had been for the best. In fact Krishna himself preferred to avoid them. They were a greedy and violent lot and weak-willed. History would be an impartial judge of their narrow-minded policies.

One thing was made abundantly clear on this occasion. Since Duryodhan was a big power other kings were intimidated by him and would not do anything to incur his displeasure. Loyalty to the Pandavs was on the wane. Apparently not many believed that they could return to power.

So now the struggle would remain within the family – brother would fight brother, friends would be turned against friends, Krishna could visualise a self-destroying war in near future. It would draw everybody into its terrible net, there was no escape. Death stared everybody in the face. That was their destiny.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Pandavs had kept their vow. A twelve year exile followed by another year of anonymous existence at last came to a close. The next step would be to ask Duryodhan to return their kingdom. But Yudhisthir had his doubts. So before sending a messenger to Hastinapur he was wondering about what would be the best thing to do. As far as he knew the Kaurav crown prince he was not likely to oblige them. His only mission in life was to deceive the Pandavs. So naturally Yudhisthir was in a dilemma. A consultation was necessary with Krishna, his other brothers as well as his friends and well-wishers.

Now after thirteen long years there was a reunion of friends and relatives at the wedding. Needless to say they were all delighted to see each other. The Pandavs could also guess their attitude regarding a new political alliance. This was a golden opportunity to discuss future plans. It would be a free and frank exchange of ideas. After getting a green signal from Krishna Yudhisthir called a secret meeting.

They met in Virat's council chamber behind closed doors. Krishna was the special guest and the responsibility of coming to a wise decision rested on him. The way he looked at it the picture seemed bleak, Duryodhan was inordinately jealous of the Pandavs. He was supported by Karna and Sakuni both of whom had their own reasons to be hostile to the five brothers. The old king doted on his eldest son. None of them were keen to look to the interests of the Pandavs. The twelve year exile allowed them to take over the Pandav domain. They hoped that during their incognito travel the Pandavs would be recognised and would be compelled to return to the forest exile. Little did they think that the Pandavs would pass the difficult test with flying colours. Anyway the thirteen years they had enjoyed Pandav property had established a claim. No king would be so saintly as to give it up without a murmur. So a peaceful solution did not seem likely. They would have to fight for it.

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Nevertheless Krishna decided to try all possible ways to come to an amicable settlement.

After everybody had taken their seats Yudhisthir started the proceedings. He came to the point without beating about the bush. "Friends", he said, "I am much obliged to you all. You are aware of the hardship we have gone through for the sake of truth. We have completed our twelve year exile and one year of living incognito. Now we want our kingdom back. Please advise us. We do not want to sour our relations with our Kaurav cousins. We want peace more than anything. What would you recommend?"

It was a difficult proposition and did not elicit a quick response. In fact the people present were afraid to speak. When no suggestion came Krishna stood up and said in very clear terms, "Gentlemen, our friends are facing a crisis. Don't you think we all have some responsibility? The time has come for all of us to help them. As a tiger becomes more ferocious after a taste of blood so has Duryodhan grown from bad to worse. Taste of unlimited power has puffed him up so much that he cannot see what is just. I do not think he is going to return to Yudhisthir what belongs to him. But virtue and morality are meaningless words for Duryodhan. He has no intention of giving up Indraprastha. On the contrary he has started a vilifying campaign against the Pandavs. In my opinion we should not remain silent spectators. Please rally round them like true friends for the sake of honour and virtue. Of course we do not know what is in Duryodhan's mind. So before taking a final decision a messenger should be sent to him. This is what I feel."

Everybody agreed — all except Balaram. He was drunk, with blood-shot eyes he began, "Krishna has spoken correctly. But let us not forget that the kingdom is now under Duryodhan. Should one go against a ruling monarch? I don't think any good would come of it. But then why should Krishna poke his nose into others' affaris. This is a party — let us have fun. After all we are guests and like guests we should behave. Both Duryodhan and Yudhisthir are related to us. We cannot be partial to any one. As for me I won't go against what I consider as right. I am not afraid to speak the truth. If Yudhisthir has gambled away his possessions the fault is his. Why did he accept the challenge from a seasoned gambler like Sakuni without knowing the ABC of the game. I think it serves him right. My pupil Duryodhan is hardly to be blamed and why should be give back what he has won. If Yudhisthir can talk him into it well

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and good. But as far as we are concerned let us keep out of their family dispute." He surveyed the assembly. "Frankly, I do not understand such political groupings. Keep me out of it. I have a trouble free life, thanks to my brother Krishna."

Everybody laughed. They took his accusations in a light spirit. But Krishna was not amused. Neither could he dismiss these utterance as meaningless mumblings of a drunken man. There was a method in his madness. But truth is sometimes unpleasant and should not be spoken. One has to take a lot of factors into account. The problem with Balaram was he was undiplomatic and often said things which put Krishna in a tight corner. These arguments might mislead others. The crux of the matter was deceit.

Duryodhan had deprived the Pandavs taking advantage of Yudhisthir's goodness and honesty. One could argue that deception and cunning, hoodwinking the opponent were all parts of the political game. The purpose was not to let the opponent have the upper hand and to crush him by any means. It was strategy—the question of right and wrong was irrelevant. Moral values do not apply in the game. Hence Duryodhan was only doing what was expected of him. He was not a sinner. Yet looking at it from another angle why should Yudhisthir be content with his defeat. He had every right to strike back. He had kept his promise, now it was Duryodhan's turn to keep his word. Krishna kept all these arguments to himself. Though he was unhappy with Balaram he did not contradict him.

Since no protest came from Krishna Satyaki opened his mouth against Balaram, "I am not surprised. It just shows the kind of person you are. Though Yudhisthir lost in an unfair game he kept his word. I do not for a moment entertain the idea that he should go to Duryodhan and beg for his right. That does not become a king — it only reveals weakness of character. If Duryodhan is not willing to withdraw from Indraprastha we will fight. We are with Yudhisthir."

King Drupad was quick to take up his point. "I agree with Satyaki" he said. "You can appeal to a person who values truth and justice, but not someone as wicked as Duryodhan. They will take it as a sign of weakness. It seems to me that time is running out. Let us mobilize a large army, send words to all the friendly states without delay. We must beat our opponents in our appeal to the other kings for assistance."

"I beg to disagree" said king Virat. "One must keep a cool head.

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That is the main thing. Everybody is entitled to his own methods — there is scope for a variety of methods to achieve your objective. Instead of shedding tears over failures it would be better if we could analyse the success and failures objectively. The best bet for us would be to devise such a policy so that the allies of our enemy take a neutral stand, or be too confused to commit themselves. So let us devise a plan of action without delay. Let Krishna be in charge. Then, with your consent I can send my court-scholar as messenger to the Kaurav court. But, I insist, let us send messengers to all the friendly states as early as possible."

This suggestion seemed to please Krishna. He smiled and said, "That is well-spoken. It would be wise to avoid a path of conflict particularly with those who thrive on tension. Violence breeds more violence. That is why one should opt for an amicable settlement. But in case our peace offer is rejected which might happen because envy, pride and greed have made a monster out of the Kaurava king — then you and Yudhisthir should summon us. So I would ask the king to declare the meeting over."

The kings returned to their respective states and Krishna left for Dwaraka. Life returned to normal in the kingdom of Matsya. Both Drupad and Virata took the initiative in establishing communication links — they were mainly interested because of the sons-in-law. The Pandavs were active in looking after the preliminaries. Neither were the Kauravs sitting idle. They sent messengers to their allies for mobilising a large army.

Tension prevailed all over the country. The news that Pandavs and Kauravs would soon be at war spread like wildfire. Arjun came to Krishna to appraise him of the latest and to discuss modalities.

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Meanwhile Duryodhan kept a close watch on the activities of the Pandavs. His army of informers kept him supplied with the latest developments. He was told of Krishna and Balaram's return to Dwaraka. He was determined to visit them, asking for help. After all they were kins. But somehow he was held up by other work and eventually could not make it before Arjun. As soon as the news came to him that Arjun had left for Dwaraka he sped in a chariot. But try as he might he could not overtake Arjun in the race. After reaching Dwaraka the first thing he did was to enquire about Arjun.

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Yes, he was already there. So, without wasting time Duryodhan entered Krishna's chamber surreptitiously.

It was a specious room, though sparsely furnished. What took one's breath away at first sight were the fresco paintings depicting the dramatic events of Krishna's life. Rukmini had them done by well-known artists, each excelling the other in boldness of conception, dynamism of strokes — vividness of colours. Duryodhan could see Bosudev and Devaki behind iron bars — the pathos of their situation effectively conveyed through the skill of the artist. The miserable mother begging for her son's life from Kamsa, Kamsa cowering before Krishna's deadly discus, Sudarshan chakra, Krishna mourning the death of Kalyavana in strange circumstances, the burning of the Khandava forest — and Krishna watching the dual between Bhim and Jarasandha. All the paintings centred round Krishna but Duryodhan was in no mood to appreciate them.

He found Krishna fast asleep in his bed. The relaxed expression heightened the charm of the winning face. Suddenly Duryodhan was seized by an irresistable desire to have him on his side. With Krishna as his ally he would be able to conquer the world. But his heart missed a beat. Suppose Arjun was to arrive just at this point. Then all his plans would be upset. If only Krishna would wake up before Arjun's arrival! That would serve the Pandavs right, Duryodhan would have him all to himself. If Krishna and Sakuni were on the same side the Pandavs would have no chance at all. They would have to end the rest of their lives roaming the forests in tattered clothes.

He watched the paintings as he had nothing else to do. Presently he grew tired and looked for a place to sit. He felt parched, a sure sign of getting nervous. Except for a bed in the centre and a chair next to the head of the four poster there was no other piece of furniture. The chair was too ornamental. But it looked inviting. He was not able to resist the temptaion for long and slumped on it, next to Krishna's pillow.

Almost at once the man he was dreading walked in. Arjun was a little surprised to find Duryodhan occupying the favourite seat of Krishna. But then Duryodhan always chose the best for himself. However Arjun kept his thoughts to himself. Since there was no other place to sit he gingerly sat at the foot of the bed.

Krishna however was not really asleep. It was part of a plan. He had already been told of the arrival of Arjun and Duryodhan.

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Their reasons for visiting were also obvious. Krishna knew only too well that Duryodhan with his typical pride was not the sort to sit on the bed. So a chair was put for him, a comfortable chair put near the head of the bed in such a way that he would have no alternative but to take it. This was done with Arjun's wishes and interests in view.

On opening his eyes he saw Arjun first. Turning his head he noticed Duryodhan next. A smile lit up his face, "An unexpected pleasure! May I know what brings you here?"

Duryodhan pre-empted Arjun. "Krishna, I want your help in the coming battle. Since I have come to you first you should oblige me – that is the convention."

It was like a bolt from the blue, Arjun was stunned. He was almost going to signal to Krishna not to agree. Enjoying his discomfiture Krishna reassured them "Do not worry. I will give all assistence to both of you. But my eyes fell on Arjun first so I think he should have the first chance to speak. What do you want, Arjun?"

It was indeed clever of Krishna to turn the situation in Arjun's favour. Grateful and happy Arjun was trying to compose his thoughts when Krishna added, "Tell me in what way can I help you. But remember one side can have my elite Narayani army and the other can have just me without arms. So, what is your choice?" He asked with a quizzical smile.

The news that Krishna would not take part in direct fighting seemed a great relief to Duryodhan. It alleyed his fears to some extent. But he was still worried lest Arjun should ask for the invincible Narayani army. Perhaps this was the reason why Arjun was given the first choice. Krishna wanted him to have the army, to have more striking power. Naturally a well trained army would make victory of the Pandavs more or less certain. Lines appeared on his forehead as Duryodhan sank deeper and deeper into desperation.

Arjun understood the signal. He was determined to have Krishna on their side. No cost was too dear for him. After all the Pandavs did not have a greater well-wisher. Krishna never foresook them in distress. There could not be any question – Krishna was his choice. And he said so in no uncertain terms.

A loud sigh of relief from Duryodhan made the other two turn towards him in surprise. Was his relief so obvious? Duryodhan was caught off his guard. Once before he had made a fool of himself in Indraprastha and had made himself an object of ridicule. Weighed

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down by remorse he hung his head in shame. Burning with shame he could only mumble, "Oh, Krishna !"

Krishna grinned – his usual smile, "Well then, you can start with the Narayani army today. Does that suit you, Duryodhan ?"

Bursting with pleasure the Kaurav prince did not want to waste any time. Taking leave of Krishna he rushed out of the room. His unseemly hurry seemed to amuse Krishna. He stared for some time after him but his smile faded as he sensed his friend's anguish. The thought of the impending war was like a burden Arjun could not shake off. Distress was writ large on his face, Krishna spoke pleasantly, "My dear I used to think you clever. But I have revised my opinion. What would you do with a useless friend like me. I would be a dead load."

Arjun folded his hands and appealed, "You are the greatest. What we need in our time of crisis is a sound head, someone to guide us. A leader like you is absolutely essential for the good of our country. We need you. With you by our side we can finish off the entire Kaurav clan. Be my friend and guide, Krishna. I want you to drive my chariot. Please don't refuse."

Krishna was astonished at the request but he agreed with pleasure. "You win ! Now I can't possibly desert you. I give you my word. I'll do everything in my power to help you."

"I am indeed grateful, my dear friend. I am highly obliged." They embraced fondly. Then Arjun left.

For some unknown reason Krishna felt depressed. He walked to and fro to keep his mind away from depressing thoughts.

Countless stars twinkled in the sky, as if waiting with bated breath. What mysteries lay hidden in the bourne of future, what events were brewing prior to a devastating war ? The stars were mute witnesses and curious spectators. Somehow Krishna felt more fascinated by the gathering dark of the evening with its play of light and shade, the known and the unknown. Nights were too stifling – they put a lid on life, not extend it. But evenings were different. From every shaded corner questions loomed, under cover of darkness. Questions relating to the mysteries of creation of which nobody had any answer. One could feel the terrible presence of time – time which was impartial, it loved nobody, hated nobody, only exerted a pull, an inexorable pull. Krishna could feel the intense attraction and he was restless. What an eventful life he was having, connected with so many different kinds of people. He has given a lot but received

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much in return. Every experience had been a taste for the new, a new stimulation. Time and again he had given life a new meaning, a new look. It was as though god had intended him to be an artist.

An artist! He uttered that word several times. Night birds fluttered past him, their harsh cries ridiculing him. An artist indeed! Well, what had happened to the artist's idea of a new united Bharat based on high ideals. Duryodhan, a member of the Jarasandha school was all set to shatter his dream. Using Pandavs as an excuse he was actually challenging Krishna to open combat.

The land of Bharat had always nurtured a friendly tradition — a spirit which brought peoples and races closer. It had never encouraged groups to break away. In line with this underlying spirit Krishna wanted to bring about a synthesis which would hold citizens and states together. For a long time he was on the look-out for a suitable person for taking up this task — a man who had a sense of belonging, who was wise and would always be willing to serve the people with a sense of mission. At long last he had met the ideal man. He was Yudhisthir — the very model of virtue who had realised the true spirit of Bharat. The occasion was the Swayamvara of Draupadi. Krishna was happy to entrust him with the task of reconciling different interests and building up of a nation on trust, love, friendship and mutual co-operation. Only he would be able to combine various forces. People would gather under his banner because he had made sacrifices for virtue. Only he and his brothers were capable of such tremendous sacrifices. Krishna saw the chance of his dream coming true at last and proceeded with great enthusiasm. He could visualise a new Bharat under the banner of dharma. People would thus have a new awakening. There would be many democratic states all owing allegiance to Yudhisthir. There would be an end to internal squabbles. Their combined effort would enthuse a new spirit of work, would revitalise the political system. A new chapter would begin — a democratic republic of Bharat.

But there was a jarring thought. It would not be as smooth-sailing as he had imagined. Everything is done with a purpose. Even a bird leaving its nest flies to a destination. No journey can be without end, without purpose. Yudhisthir, the once virtuous ideal of manhood was now reduced to a caricature of himself, thanks to the mischief wrought by wicked Duryodhan. Yudhisthir was incapable of taking a decision, he wavered before taking any action as though he was afraid to act. Duryodhan was making full use of his weakness

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and was about to strike a death blow to the Pandav clan. With the fall of Yudhisthir truth, justice and dharma would be eclipsed – the dream of one Bharat would also fade. Dreams are what keep people going. A life without dreams is meaningless, like a stretch of land with no source of water.

Krishna spent a restless night. On daybreak he asked his charioteer to get the vehicle ready. Presently he set out on a journey.

The chariot raced through hills and forests. Finally he reached the city of Upaplabya and pulled up at the Pandav camp.

The sun had just set. The western horizon was still red with its glow. Shadows became longer. Birds returned to their nests. The evening star had come out in the west. The sky was growing dark and mysterious. Every instant new stars appeared. Soon the dark blue backdrop acquired thousands of glimmering spots.

Krishna leapt from his chariot. Meanwhile Yudhisthir had heard of his visit and came forward to receive him. He was a little surprised at the abrupt manner but did not ask any questions. He welcomed Krishna warmly and took him in.

The tiring journey did not seem to exhaust Krishna. He looked as fresh as ever. Yudhisthir asked him to rest for a while. He was sad and depressed. The thought of the coming battle had cast a gloom over his pleasant face. Krishna felt sorry for him. He enquired kindly, "You seem to be pre-occupied. Will you let me share your worries ?"

"Later," said Yudhisthir, grateful for the concern, "I'll tell you everything by and by. But first you must have some rest."

Krishna's eyes sparkled. "There is no need for that, you can confide to me now."

The Pandavs were always happy in the company of Krishna who was the real protagonist in the political drama though he preferred to remain in the background. He was so dependable that the Pandavs could not do without him. Now even in his worried state Yudhisthir was glad to have him listen to his peculiar problems. "Every attempt at truce has failed my friend". He said sadly. "Duryodhan flatly refused all our offers. he would not even concede to our demand for five villages."

"Five villages ?" Krishna was more curious than astonished. "You asked for just five villages ? Would you mind telling me the reason for this strange proposal ?"

"I was merely trying to follow your precepts" replied Yudhisthir. "Avoid war at all costs. as you have always advised us. A bloody

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confrontation leads to untold misery for ordinary citizens. I wanted to take the wind off his sails, prevent a war. So the five villages were a token offer. All I wanted to do was to outwit Duryodhan because I knew that once we Pandavs had a foothold the rest would have been easy. My strategy was to take five steps backward before taking one step forward."

Krishna burst into laughter. "Well, your strategy did not work then. You were outwitted by Duryodhan."

His amusement hurt the eldest Pandav, "It is not a laughing matter my friend. In order to get something you must also be ready to give. After all they are our cousins. So I adopted a policy of give and take. I wanted the world to know that the Pandavs are not blood-thirsty hounds. They always prefer friendship to conflict, I wanted to play on brotherly sentiments hence the claim for just five villages. I wanted to prove that Pandavs were nobler in spirit. In a way it would have been to our political advantage."

"I do not see how."

"It is difficult to explain. You know war can sometimes bring about changes of attitude. Loyalty to dharma and truth, sympathy for one's fellow—beings, hatred for deception, conflict of intellect and conscience — all these are apt to change under the pressure of war. People change, some are led to a quicker end, some get a chance to correct themselves. These changes occur with a kind of inevitability. Swift and unpremeditated events happen with a suddenness which cannot be rationally explained."

Krishna stared at him without comprehending his argument. What was he getting at? Was it wishful thinking? He was basically a man of virtue, not a scheming politician, so his political calculations were not sound — there were a lot of loopholes. He smiled at Yudhisthir and remarked, "You are an idealist, people respect and trust you. It will perhaps hurt you to learn that Duryodhan does not have the slightest regard for ethics or morals. He is enjoying an honour and position which is not rightfully earned. He has swindled and cheated, raided and plundered — a man without any sense of guilt. While you roam the forests for keeping your word, he lives in luxury. A mean crook like him will not understand the meaning of dharma as you understand it."

Krishna was excited. Yudhisthir watched him change colour. What was he hinting at? He would never offend him but what was

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the cause for this sudden outburst, Yudhisthir wondered. He felt guilty.

Nobody spoke. At last Krishna composed his ruffled spirit and smiled exuding his typical charm. He wanted to put Yudhisthir at ease. "You are right. Internal difference can only create tension. It is wise to create division in the enemy rank. The more they fight among themselves the better it is for us."

Yudhisthir cheered up considerably. "Let me tell you something then. You will see how we have put your strategies to good use. Words have been sent all over the country about the coming battle. Kings were marching with their contingents to join either the Pandavs or the Kauravs. Salya, the king of Madra was also on his way. As you are aware he happens to be the maternal uncle of Nakul and Sahadev. Salya was accompanied by his brave sons and a huge army. The news of his approach had come to Duryodhan. He had a splendid camp erected on the way so that the king and his men could rest their weary limbs. He employed the best artisans and architects for decoration. Entertainment, food, drink everything was provided in plenty. Salya was garlanded on arrival. The ministers and officers of Duryodhan spared no pains to make his stay comfortable. They treated him like a god. Naturally the king of Madra was pleased. He went round the camp, admired the decor and remarked, "Please call the artist. I would like to reward him."

Duryodhan was watching his reactions from a distance. He now came to the king and stood by modestly. In an expansive mood the Madra king declared, "I am indeed impressed by your hospitality. The art works are also excellent. I'd like to give you something in return. Tell me what I can do for you."

Duryodhan was waiting for this. "It is my pleasure to have given you satisfaction. If you are so pleased Sir, do me a favour, please join me as the commander-in-chief of my army."

"Very well. I accept", said Salya.

The incident as related by Yudhisthir did not please Krishna. "How could he do it" – he asked. "After all he is your uncle."

"Very simple. The king of Madra is very vulnerable. He tries not to offend anyone. So he fell an easy prey. However after promising Duryodhan that he would take charge of his army he came here to see me and made a clean breast of everything."

"Excuse my saying so, but you must be on your guard. Your

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enemies are very deceitful — Duryodhan is capable of devising such diabolic ways as to make your political defeat pale into insignificance."

These harsh words did not seem to have any effect on Yudhisthir. He merely looked at Krishna, eyes sparkling with subdued laughter. Non-plussed, Krishna wondered if he had been unduly hard. Perhaps he should not have spoken so. But Yudhisthir ended the suspense. He smiled and said gently, "My good friend you have always been so nice to me, advising me, telling me what to do. But I have not been a deserving pupil. You don't have much faith in my wisdom. But have faith, I can't be making mistakes all my life. Perhaps I too have a little bit of sense."

Krishna hurried to make amends, "Please, forgive me for what I said just now. I hold you in great regard. Do tell me the rest of the story. How did you win Salya over?"

Yudhisthir was his amicable self. He said, "I too am very fond of you. In politics there is always difference of opinion. Didn't you tell us that there is no such thing as a complete victory or a complete defeat. Policy should be determined by self-interest. There are many ways of going about it. I had already lost to Duryodhan in his clever move. So in order to whitewash my loss of face I told Salya that I will not ask him to go back on his word. But he had acted against our interests — it was a temporary lapse. Now he must make amends, though it would not be very ethical. But as his nephew, we have some claim on him. He smiled and said, go ahead. I asked him to drive Karna's chariot. The battle between Karna and Arjun must be a fair fight, between equals. Since Krishna was going to drive Arjun's chariot it was only in the fitness of things that someone of equal status and dexterity should be on the other side. You fit that description. I had to ask you two favours — to save Arjun and to reduce Karna's power."

Krishna was listening intently. He made no comment. So Yudhisthir explained, "The way I see it — nobody would suspect Salya if he wishes to drive Karna's chariot. Once in control he would do things to irritate Karna to such an extent as to start a quarrel. Now Karna has a curse on him that he would lose his power if he gets excited. He would even forget to use his weapons."

As Krishna listened his wonder grew. He had certainly underestimated Yudhisthir.

"He agreed." said Yudhisthir. "In fact he went one step ahead. He said he would have our interests at heart. How could he forget

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that he was our uncle? He would do everything possible to save Arjun's life, putting Karna in such tight corners that he would be agitated, angry, excited and lose his power. Thus it would be easy for Arjun to kill him. Salya said he would gladly do more — I would only have to ask for it."

For some time Krishna was too overwhelmed to say anything. The man of virtue had become a shrewd tactician at last. His eyes sparkled in delight. Slowly he said, "I am beaten totally. I do not know how to congratulate you. You were reputed as a good and virtuous man. I held you in high esteem. But this incident has opened up a new facet, the inborn politician in you has come to the forefront. Indeed you are great. You have made the best use of a bad situation, using not deception but truth as your weapon. This is truly wonderful. You have saved the Pandavs from a great crisis by your quick wit and presence of mind."

Peculiarly enough both Krishna and Yudhisthir were thinking along the same lines, without divulging it to one another. Karna was the man they had to be careful about. The battle between Karna and Arjun would decide the fate of the war — and it would be the fiercest. Naturally they were both concerned about Arjun. Their concerns were of a different nature. Yudhisthir was apprehensive of Karna's deadly weapons — the Vasava and Nag arrows. Krishna was worried for a different reason. The Pandavs did not know that Karna was their brother. It would be a fight between brothers with deadly consequence. Karna was determined to humiliate Arjun. The truth of his birth would only strengthen his determination. Arjun had always been his arch rival. Krishna was afraid of Karna's spirit of vengeance. So the assurance of Salya relieved him to some extent but his worries persisted.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If the old king Dhritarastra was mortally afraid of anyone it was Yudhisthir. He was afraid of his virtue which was his strength and of his honesty which gave him immense advantage over his adversaries. The anger of a virtuous man can reduce the whole world to shambles. He had to be restrained by any means. So Sanjay was sent to the Pandav camp at Upaplaba to assess their strength but the specific motive was to mislead and deceive the good man.

The court priest of king Virat had already returned from Hastinapur disappointed. He was sent as the Pandav envoy. Now the arrival of Sanjay bearing a special message from Dhritarashtra brought a glimmer of hope. Perhaps he was bringing good tidings.

The Pandavs were optimistic but Krishna could smell something fishy. How could Duryodhan change his mind in a couple of days — he wondered. It was not possible. Sanjay was sent with some evil motive, perhaps to create a division among the five brothers. Nothing was beyond the Kauravs. Yudhisthir in all his goodness was ready to welcome him with open arms, thinking it to be a peace-offer. But that was far from the case. Sanjay was sent to do some damage, to sow seeds of discord. Wishing to warn Yudhisthir he gave him a knowing glance indicating disapproval. His eyes met Sanjay's. Quickly Krishna had to break into a charming smile of welcome. He was not going to let Sanjay guess what was in his mind. He asked pleasantly, "It is good to see you Sanjay. I hope all are well."

Sanjay returned his greetings. Then turning to Yudhisthir he began, "I come as your true well-wisher. You have never hurt Duryodhan in any way, but he has always been very unfriendly towards you all."

Then he came to the point. "As far as I can see, Kauravs are not going to return your kingdom without a fight. It is my earnest request to you, do find a way out to avert the bloodshed. How can a kind-hearted man like you stand the spectacle of crying mothers, widows and children, mourning the loss of the loved ones. I am sure you will not cause such a thing to happen. Duryodhan may be a

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crook but would you act against your nature because of his perversity ?"

Yudhisthir listened to his arguments trying to get at his real meaning. Encouraged by the attention Sanjay went on, "You are loved by all, respected by all. Nobody expects you to stoop to the level of a wicked man. I cannot for a moment conceive how the mighty Pandavs can get involved in a bloody civil war. It would be a sin even to think if you committing a sacrilege! What happens to your noble ideals, your long years of misery, all your wanderings in the forests for the sake of truth if you plunge into a fight just for getting back a life of luxury? What was all your sacrifice worth? Was it for nothing that you went through such an ordeal? If the kingdom means so much to you why didn't you kill the Kauravs in the first place instead of going into exile? You could not do it then because of your inherent goodness. But you are going to do it now just because Duryodhan wants to fight. So you are giving up your ideals just to please him. Whose interests do you have in mind? To an ascetic like you victory or defeat hardly makes any difference. It does not become you to fight for name and fame. Charity and compassion are but second nature to you. You are magnanimous, surely you will not be lead astray by petty selfish motives. Only the truly detached person can rise beyond anger and passion and that is what is expected from people like you."

It was an excellent speech—a marvellous mixture of morality and diplomacy. Naturally Yudhisthir was moved. Everybody kept quiet. But Krishna was angry because Sanjay was taking advantage of Yudhisthir's gullible nature. He gave Yudhisthir a hard look but it failed to have any effect on the eldest Pandav who was already torn between duty and dharma. Lines appeared on his forehead. He was too overwhelmed to speak.

He had hoped that Sanjay would present a new formula for peace, show a new way to end the stalemate. But there was no such indication in what Sanjay had said. Disappointment writ large on his face he said sadly, "But Sanjay did I ever say that I was keen to go to war? Why do you fear the worst? Which fool would opt for battle if he can get what he wants without it? I will be happy with whatever little the Kauravs are ready to part with and I assure you that I have no intention to get involved in a futile war."

This admission did not please Krishna. He interrupted. "But let me tell you my king that it is a sin to shirk from one's duty. Life

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itself will come to a standstill if nobody does the work assigned to him. I think Sanjay would agree with me. Being a ksatriya Yudhisthir is right in attempting to retrieve his territory as is expected of a ksatriya—not doing it would mean straying from the path of dharma."

The words of Krishna helped Yudhisthir to get over his temporary lapse. He said, "I think Krishna is right. Duryodhan and his greedy brothers are determined to have their forefather's territory all to themselves. They will do anything in their power to keep us out. They have been unfair to us all along. Even now the war can be stopped if they restrain their greed. If there is a bloody war you will only have Duryodhan to blame. It is only because of his stubborn attitude that we are forced to take up arms."

Krishna joined in. His tone was sharp and bitter. "So you see, even the virtuous Yudhisthir is upset. Duryodhan has acted like a sneak thief. How can one forget the insult to one's wife! Or pardon people like you who saw it happen but did not lift your finger to stop it. Can such people be trusted? Thanks for your advice. It has only heightened the Pandav's desire for revenge. Why are you silent? You have read the scriptures I hope. You know that virtue can be earned by destroying the wicked. Duryodhan and his brothers clearly fall into this category. We have the sanction of the scriptures to kill the likes of them."

Krishna paused, hoping Sanjay would try to justify his position. But Sanjay made no such attempt. He said, after a long pause, "I beseech you, do not go for war. It is for the good of all concerned. It is the ernest desire of Bhisma and the old king."

Krishna was visibly pleased, so his ploy had worked. It amused him to find that he understood human nature so well. He looked at Sanjay, "Listen, I wish both the sides well. More than anyone I am for peace. The Pandavs are a peace-loving lot but would the old king and his greedy and spiteful sons listen to my advice for peace?"

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Sanjay left. Yudhisthir found himself torn by opposing pulls. On the one hand he could not help agreeing to what he had said. Yet on the other there were so many other questions to be taken into account. The definitions of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood overlapped leaving him in total confusion. For a long time he sat still but a storm was raging inside. "It is better to beg from door to door rather than

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kill thousands of innocent people"—the words of Sanjay took complete hold of his reason and he could not shake it off. Forgive and forget—that was the most important maxim in the world. It holds the creation together. Going to war would mean going against his own cherished ideals. Was he then his own worst enemy? Caught in a moral dilemma Yudhisthir grew increasingly desperate. Confusion bred its own brand of scepticism. One part of him shrank from the ordeal of war while the other felt he should keep the ksatriya flag flying.

Frankly, he dreaded the horrors of a battlefield. History would point its accusing finger to him—he would be held responsible for the massacre as much as Duryodhan. But he was merely a puppet in the hands of destiny, of the great surge of time which followed its own inexorable course, taking poor mortals tumbling along. He too was a prisoner, caught in the flow of time. Perhaps he would have a heavy price to pay for being one of the important dramatis personae.

Krishna could guess what was going on in his mind. "Please do not forget my good king", he gently chided, "that you are an emperor. We expect firm action from you. We expect you to act for what is best. Indetermination does not become a king. A king should be firm in his resolve and stick to his decision. Do not for a moment forget the root cause of your misery during the exile. Because you were loyal to your dharma, because you wanted to keep your promise you willingly chose a life of austerity. But then you also swore to avenge Draupadi's dishonour and punish Duryodhan for going back on his word. There is no escape now. The evil-doer has to be punished for the sake of justice. Dharma will take its course and chastise the sinner. You and I are mere representatives of that force."

His words cut Yudhisthir to the quick. He looked at Krishna and spoke slowly. "You are perfectly right my friend. Yet I too am a human being and my heart goes out to the innocent victims of war."

He had to pause to control his emotions. But it was no use, he could not very well be objective. He sighed and said, "You heard everything from Sanjay. Duryodhan will not let anyone share his domain, even though part of what he now has in his possession belongs to us. His blind envy will not let him see reason. The entire country may be set ablaze for all his cares. In these dark days of unsettled politics made murkier by Duryodhan you are the only ray of hope. For us, the Pandavs all hopes seem to have ended, all except

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you. Only you can show us a way out. So I would request you to visit Hastinapur to make one last attempt for peace. Please, do it for my sake. I'll be ever grateful."

The ring of sincerity in his appeal moved Krishna. For ever loyal to their eldest brother, Bhim and Arjun joined in, "Please Krishna try to be polite and persuade them. Do not threaten or do anything which would spoil the chances of peace and bring an end to the Bharat dynasty."

While Yudhisthir was emotional the two brothers were coldly rational. Their appeal came more from a sense of loyalty than anything else. Krishna could hardly believe his own ears. Coming from the spirited Arjun and Bhim such peace proposals were inconceivable. He stared at them in disbelief but their appeal seemed to echo in his ears. So this was what the brave Pandavs had been reduced to — begging for favour! What happened to their self-confidence, the pride in their strength? Years of untold misery and humiliation had eroded their self-esteem. To Krishna it seemed a tragic waste of human potential. He would have to stop it at any cost.

"Your point of view is coloured with ethics," he spoke to Yudhisthir bitterly. "Anything that can be got without going to war would satisfy you. But don't forget your true dharma, your majesty. For a ksatriya must respond to the challenge of combat, to run away would mean weakness. Duryodhan will turn down your truce offer because it comes out of your weakness. He has no reason to fear a weak adversary."

He now turned to the two mighty warriors Bhim and Arjun but what he saw were shadows of their former selves. He was particularly annoyed with Bhim. Was it the same Bhim who had excelled himself in the Kamyaka forest?

Krishna's face hardened with displeasure. He frowned. The two brothers felt so guilty that they tried to avoid his sharp accusing glance. Everything was so quiet that one could even hear a needle drop. Suddenly Krishna renewed his verbal charge. His tone was at once menacing and sharp. He began with Bhim.

"Bhimsen!" He roared. Bhim prepared himself for the worst. Krishna's words hit him like arrows. "Have you forgotten your vow — that you would avenge your wife's humiliation. Remember what you had said at the Kaurav court. You swore that you would tear Duhsasan's flesh apart and wash Draupadi's hair in the blood. You had sworn by your sacred club and promised to your brothers that you would

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murder Duryodhan. 'As the sun rising in the east is true so would be my words' – isn't that what you had said?"

He paused for effect, then went on with biting sarcasm, "What an excellent actor you are – pretending that you cannot sleep nights, you act in a hysterical manner, you are unable to concentrate – so all these are mere shows just to please Draupadi. You were breathing fire and brimstone then and now you are talking of peace just when war looms large. Shame on you! So your vow was an idle brag. I had a better idea of your worth. But now I see you are truly making a mess of your ksatriya name. The moral duty of a ksatriya has been blown to the winds."

Bhim could not take it any longer. His eyes red with suppressed rage, his limbs trembling he blurted out, "I am sorry to hear such rude words from you spoken without reason. Nobody dares talk to me in such language. But you did. You wrong me but perhaps I deserved it. We the children of Pandu prize modesty and never indulge in self-glorification. But you have compelled me to do it. I'm sorry but I can't help it now."

Krishna watched him – a malevolent smile playing on his lips. Paying no heed to him Bhim went on, "My prime concern is preservation of the Bharat line. That was what prompted me suggest a peace offer. I for one do not wish to build a Pandav empire on the ruins of another, over dead bodies of our own people. If war does break out let it not be caused by the hostility and hatred of the Pandavs. If we are forced into battle by Duryodhan's stubborn stupidity then you will see Bhim for what he is worth. I never boast in vain, for your information, I am never afraid to take up a challenge. No battle can exhaust me. Let the gods come down to take up arms against me for all I care."

"Spoken like a man", said Krishna embracing Bhim happily. "You had me worried Bhim by your cowardly suggestion. So I had to pull you up. Forgive me if I sounded rude. But my only purpose was to inspire you, to get you out of your lethargy."

Both Arjun and Bhim now understood the game and were grateful to Krishna who was jubilant at his success. More pragmatic than his brothers Arjun realised that Krishna's rebuke to Bhim was actually directed to the truce offer of Yudhisthir. That offer was sure to fail. Krishna's indignation meant to make Yudhisthir aware of the terrible consequences – he was becoming too complacent. When war was almost certain it was futile to talk of a compromise. The eldest

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Pandavs' magnanimous gesture would not yield any result. So what was the use—Arjun asked himself. The moon has dark patches but that cannot affect its brightness. Yudhisthir in trying to propose a compromise was smearing the Pandav reputation, but perhaps the Pandavs would survive this stain. So on a last face-saving attempt he urged Krishna, "From what you have said it seems the Kuru Pandav encounter is only a matter of time. One must try nevertheless. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts we do not succeed yet the effort must continue. But if you feel that they deserve to be killed then why don't you say so right away? Why beat about the bush?"

Krishna looked at Nakul the fourth brother, waiting for his reaction. Nakul who always kept himself in the background now came forward. "I would say let us do what the occasion demands." He observed.

Krishna now turned to Sahadev. The handsome face of the youngest Pandav was hard, rebellious, "Oh no Krishna", his confident voice rang out, "Don't talk of peace, even if the Kauravs want it. You must see to it that the scores are settled in the field of battle. How else can we avenge the dishonour meted out to Draupadi. I want war. I don't mind if the three elder brothers make a fuss over dharma but as for me I don't care for dharma. I will fight."

His sentiment was appreciated by Satyaki and Krishna, though Krishna preferred to keep quiet.

This open revolt however was not welcomed by Yudhisthir. But it was not in his nature to make his displeasure obvious. He said to Krishna mechanically, "Whatever others might say I am asking you to go to the Kaurav court with a peace offer. You know how to have your way. Whatever is good for us must be presented before them in the way you think best."

Suddenly like a flash of lightening Draupadi emerged from inside the room. She was waiting for the last word from Yudhisthir. As soon as he had finished she shot out, her face flushed, eyes glowing. With great effort she controlled herself, she bit her lips hard to keep back the unpleasant words which struggled to come out.

Her sudden entrance took Yudhisthir completely by surprise. When he sensed her anger he lowered his eyes. Giving him a scathing glance Draupadi turned to Krishna. "You know what has transpired Krishna, how in all these years I have simmered in slow fire only to find the virtuous King along with his two able brothers begging for mercy. After thirteen years of torture they have forgotten their pro-

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mise, their duty, their oath of vengeance. To think that I have such cowards for my husbands who let the ruffians molest me in the open court. I am more ashamed than words can say. I am disgusted, who says my husbands are the bravest of the brave? I don't find them so. They are more like spineness creatures appealing for mercy from the villain Duryodhan. Oh that I should live to see this day! For shame!"

She struck her forehead in a mad frenzy of despair. Her tangled uncombed hair covered her face, through which her eyes glowed like two balls of fire. She crept very close to Krishna and looked at him defiantly, "You Krishna, you are my only hope. I don't expect much from my worthless husbands. I depend only on you. You are my saviour. I want to see the wretched arms of Duhsasan, the indecent legs of Duryodhan severed from their bodies and rolling in the ground —the arms which had dared to touch me, the legs with which Duryodhan had made obscene gestures. Don't keep silent my friend, tell me what are you going to do so that I can avenge my dishonour. Do not forget that the sacrificial fire out of which I was born is raging inside me. It will only be put out with the maiming of my tormentors."

She broke down into uncontrollable sobs. Deeply touched, Krishna tried to soothe her ruffled feelings, "Please listen to me" he pleaded. "Stop crying – wipe your eyes. The price of a drop of your tear will cost the Kaurav wives dear. For each one of your tear drops they will have to shed a hundred. The fire raging in your breast will engulf the entire land and start a conflagaration of unprecedented proportions. Duryodhan's body will lie unattended in the battle field to be eaten up by dogs and jackals. And you, my precious Draupadi, you will once again be the empress of the land."

Meanwhile Draupadi had covered her face with her shapely fingers. She asked softly, "And yet you insist on visiting Hastinapur!"

"Of course".

The confident reply made Draupadi look up at him in surprise. There was a quizzical look in Krishna's eyes. "This is politics my dear, its ways are strange. I'll be going not for the good king Yudhisthir but for my own sake."

Draupadi's astonishment was so great that she could not even bring herself to ask the simply question "why?" Krishna smiled enigmatically, "Nothing can stop the Kauravs from total ruin – they have reached a point of no return. Yet I'll make an attempt at truce. Do you know why? To stop idle gossip. To stop people from saying

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that Krishna could have stopped the war if he had made the effort. Let me try and fail. That will stop the idle tongues. Not only that— I'll kill many birds with one stone. My peace offer will please Yudhisthir, it will add one more feather to his cap, increase the glory and reputation of the Pandavs who already command great respect. They will no longer be blamed for the bloody fight between brothers. And I will also come out of this ordeal unscathed", Krishna stopped. A strange smile lit up his face.

* * *

One should never underestimate one's enemy—this was the golden maxim Krishna believed in. Hence he was always on his guard because one could not be sure when and where the enemy would strike. With his keen political foresight he understood that for Duryodhan he was the toughest hardle. The logical thing for him would be to try to keep Krishna away from the Pandavs. He was capable of the meanest act to achieve this end. Once he held Krishna as hostage it would be easy to extract another promise from the Pandavs—a promise to Duryodhan's advantage—possibly another forest exile. For Krishna's release the Pandavs would willingly relinquish their claim. The people of Dwaraka too would do anything for Krishna. The question was, would Krishna give the enemies that opportunity?

The visit to Hastinapur was like walking straight into a lion's den. But however risky, that visit was important. Though Krishna was going as a spokesman of Yudhisthir and enjoyed a kind of diplomatic immunity yet he was fairly certain of an encounter. He had no faith in Duryodhan and his counsellors. Not taking any chance he had his chariot equipped with all kinds of deadly weapons. Two great warriors, Satyaki and Kritavarma accompanied taking a vast troop along consisting of infantry, cavalry and chariots.

The news soon reached Hastinapur. Duryodhan, his brothers along with other officers of the court waited for the visitors at the main entrance to the city. They were given a royal welcome. Krishna was garlanded, given a ritual reception. At last Duryodhan invited him to his palace. "You are our most honoured guest. We would be most obliged to have you with us."

"I am sorry, your majesty but I can't oblige you." Was Krishna's answer.

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The address took the Kaurav off his guard at first. He stared at Krishna in disbelief for some time before he could demand an explanation. "But this is most unexpected. You are a friend and well wisher of both the clans. Then what makes you turn down my offer of hospitality, if I may ask?"

Krishna smiled pleasantly. "My dear sir, I come as a messenger of the Pandavs, to serve their cause. That puts you in a different category. People hostile to the Pandavs cannot be counted as my friend, on the contrary I would treat them as my enemies as well. So you see, the old equations have changed. It is better to call a spade a spade. You and I cannot be friendly now. It is not advisable to accept food offered by the enemy. I would have been very happy to be your guest but under the circumstances I am obliged to put up at Vidur's place."

The plain speaking was meant to offend Duryodhan and it did not fail to hit its target. It was as though somebody had slapped him on the face. His face turned pale. Krishna was enjoying the spectacle. All along he had kept his cool, his characteristic smile never leaving him. He always studied the weakest points of his enemy and chose to attack to be so unobtrusive that apparently there would be no ill feeling. The proud Duryodhan was struck at a sensitive spot and was left with no answer. Highly amused, Krishna's lips arched a little more, a gesture that he was now leaving for Vidur's place. He signalled his driver to move. Within an instant four lively horses sprang into motion and his chariot sped away.

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The next day Krishna left Vidur's place for the royal court in a colourful procession. Thousands of soldiers, horses, elephants and chariots marched along the road. Music greeted them on their arrival. Flowers were showered on him, the shrill sound of conch shells filled the air. Sandal-pasted and garlanded Krishna entered the court, flanked by Satyaki and Vidur.

He proceeded to the seat specially set for him facing the throne of the old king. Paying his respects to the two senior-most members – Bhisma and Dhritarastra, Krishna took his seat. The Kauravs crowded behind him. Krishna looked around as though to take in the decor of the hall but his actual intention was to keep an eye on

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the mischievous Duryadhan and his associates. They were planning to trap him in some way—of this Krishna was more or less certain.

The silence in the court was like the lull before the storm. Even their eyes were hostile. It seemed to Krishna that in such a charged situation an offer of peace would be futile. They were bent on a confrontation. So instead of appeals it would be better to come straight to the point. It might take the wind off their sails. So going for an aggressive strategy Krishna decided to talk to Dhritarastra directly and convey to him the message sent by the Pandavs.

He stood facing the old king but addressed the entire assembly, "Your majesty, the matter I have come to see you about is so urgent that I'll cut short any introduction. Time and again your children have shown their greedy and spiteful nature. They are cruel and without any principle. In their insatiable greed they are ready to gobble up the entire world. Their conflict with the Pandavs is not one of policy, but between fair play and jealousy, between dharma and sin. Your sons ridicule the Pandav's magnanimity as cowardice. Your majesty, their prayer for only five villages was a friendly gesture. But your son has attempted to smear mud on their reputation. I warn you, your majesty, restrain your son while there is still time. The way he has taken is a path of evil. Even if he wins the whole world he will not get the blessings of the gods. He will be ruined. God's curse will destroy him."

He paused, an enigmatic smile on his lips. The assembly was listening to him spell-bound. Krishna glanced at Sakuni, Karna and Bhagadatta and went on, "Your majesty, the so-called counsellors of your sons, who are leading them to a bloody civil war do not have their interest at heart. They just want to settle their personal scores with the Pandavs. This common cause has brought them together and they are using the dim-witted Duryodhan to their own advantage. Your son does not know that his friends are leading him to ruin. After the battle he will have nothing to call his own—the taste of victory is going to elude him. Please, I beseech you, stop him from this suicidal path. Let the Pandav power be with you and together you can enjoy the dominance of the world. With your combined might you'd be a match for the king of heavens, Indra himself. Mark my words, your majesty—the Pandavs are also ready for war. Now it is for you to decide."

Everybody appreciated the logic of this argument though they preferred to remain silent. Even Dhritarastra was touched. But he

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merely drew a long sigh and sat motionless. Vidur felt sorry for him. He whispered, "Please do something your majesty. It is a time of grave crisis, Krishna himself has brought a proposal of peace. Now is the time to act. Ask your unfortunate sons to stop playing this dangerous game." ...

But Dhritarastra hesitated, "I understand everything", he admited. "But I am helpless. I can't stop Duryodhan. He does not listen to me."

Duryodhan, angry and excited turned to Krishna, "You are partial to the Pandavs. You can't see any good in me. I am tired of hearing the Pandavs praised by all. Even Vidur, Bhisma, Dron and all the rest of them keep blaming me. The Pandavs are never accused. I tell you your harsh words will only make my resolve stronger. They are not going to get back their kingdom by threatening me."

'But they only ask for what is their rightful share', said Krishna, his voice cold and unemotional. 'The fact of the matter is you are jealous of them and always wish them ill. To what depths of degradation you have sunk in order to destroy. You are worse than your father because you are blind in spite of having eyes to see. You know very well you are wrong but you hate to admit it. The Pandavs lost in the gamble, but they kept their word. You haven't. Does it add to your glory? You are piling up sin upon sin. Anyway, let me come to the point. You have absolutely no right to the assets, the territory and the capital of the Pandavs. They are demanding their rights."

Duryodhan had no answer. Since he could not protest he hissed like an angry snake. Bhisma took his silence to be a sign of yielding and said tenderly, "My dear Duryodhan, listen to Krishna, don't be stubborn and bring about the ruin of the Puru clan. After all the Pandavs are your cousins. Why should you stand in the way of their rightful ownership. Think it over. What you are going to start will lead to the deaths of thousands of your subjects not to speak of your relations. The curse of the victims will be on you. I request you, listen to Krishna. Let your old father have some peace of mind."

"Listen to Bhisma's advice", pleaded Dron.

Ignoring the appeal of the elders Duryodhan turned to Karna, Sakuni and Duhsasan for consultation. After a great deal of deliberation he declared, "We are not going to yield. The question of giving back their share is irrelevant."

Promptly Bhisma asked, "What about your promise?"

Duryodhan made a face. "Why, the Pandavs are the first to break

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their word. They have sent Krishna to insult us. I am not obliged to concede anything, not even the spec of earth which a needle can pick up."

Enraged, Bhisma shouted, "This is mad man's talk. Have you forgotten how Arjun, single-handed defeated all of you when you attempted to take away Virat's cattle. Why he even disrobed all the Kaurav braves."

Duryodhan almost sprang on him like an arrow shot from a bow. "For your information" he spoke with disdain, "I am not depending on either you or Dron. Between Karna, Sakuni, Duhsasan and myself — we can take care if the Pandav brothers, and we are going to finish them off, just you wait and see."

"Stop it, stop it", yelled the old king.

The situation was fast becoming explosive. Anything could happen any moment. Before it detereorated further Krishna had to do something. Eyes blazing he shouted at the top of his voice, "Duryodhan !"

It hit the court like a crash of thunder. Everybody sat up. Krishna began to speak. His voice surged and rolled sending reverberations throughout the hall. "You are no longer in control of your actions. You are being used like a puppet by an unholy nexus. It is high time for you to look at them for what they really are. Are you aware that they are making you do all the dirty work and you are obeying them blindly ? What kind of a politician do you call yourself if you are unable to see through their design ? The Pandavs are your blood relations, they wish you well. They would be happy with just a token ownership of five villages. You are ascribing this great sacrifice as their weakness. You are making a big mistake. Bhim has decided to forget his vow, Draupadi has extended her forgiveness even Yudhisthir has relinquished his claim of a large empire — all for avoiding a great disastér. They have offered truce and friendship. They would like to co-operate with you. Unfortunately you cannot make out between a true and a false friend. The people you depend on are not really your friends. Sakuni wants to avenge his father's death through you, though you are not aware of it. The others would like to hold the reins of power in their own hands by letting brothers fight among themselves. You are so blinded by envy that your vision is clouded. There is still time. All is not lost yet."

Krishna's words had the effect of showing a red rag to a mad

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bull. Breathing noisily Duryodhan gave him a scathing look, then nodded to his cronies.

Satyaki was quick to react. He beckoned to Kritavarma and whispered, "I don't like to look of things. You better keep guard near the entrance. I am going to get the warriors. Be very careful. Keep an eye on the enemy."

He left the hall quickly, unnoticed by others. Krishna had a fixed grin, it now began to look ominous as he listened to Duryodhan's tirade.

"Listen, you friend of the Pandavs", he screamed, "The first lesson in politics is to wipe our your opponent, by any means. Yudhisthir is not only my adversary, he is my greatest enemy. It will not be in my interest to have him around. I find his presence undesirable because he stands for all those values which are repugnant to me. He must be wiped out completely, along with his reputation, honour and glory. But you stand in my way. But for you I would have ruled over a large empire in peace. You don't want it, so you are instigating them. But enough is enough. In order to avoid the war I'll simply arrest you. That will also insure me the allegience of the Vrishni clan. All of Bharata will come under me, so I must hold you prisoner."

Krishna burst out laughing, "That is easier said than done, you fool! Do you think I have come here alone, without protection? Look at the entrance where mighty Kritavarma and Satyaki are waiting for my signal. Between us we can conquer the three worlds of heaven, hell and the earth. But I don't find any need to waste our energy here."

Meanwhile the old king had asked Vidur to bring Gandhari to the court, as things were going beyond control. As soon as Gandhari heard of the crisis generated by the display of tempers in which her sons had a major role – she rushed to the hall and without much ado decided to exercise her authority, "Cool down my sons", she pleaded, "Anger is the worst of sins, you have the existence of your line at stake. Krishna, your uncle Vidur mean well. The primary duty of a king is not ruling over his subjects but to improve their lot. The insight, objective analysis, even the power to laugh at oneself are qualities required in an able statesman. You have none of those qualities, my son. The four great warriors you are so proud of are your dependents. They have to go along with you, fight for you if need be and perhaps die for you but they will never look upon the Pandavs as their enemy. As they are related to you, so they are to

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the Pandavs as well. Listen to your mother's advice. Stop all this nonsense of a battle."

Gandhari's entrance was greeted with a respectful silence and it continued throughout her speech. But if she did not have her eyes blindfolded she would have noticed that her wicked sons Duryodhan and Duhsasan were inching towards Krishna from two sides with Sakuni and Karna in the fray.

Krishna could see that soon he would be encircled by them. But he was not a bit worried. The placid expression of contentment did not leave his face. He continued to stare at them. It cast a hypnotic spell. People sat glued to their seats, dazed and unable to take their eyes off him. Nobody moved. Even Duryodhan and the other three were immobilised.

When the spell was broken they found the four assailants transfixed in their aggressive pose. Krishna was gone. So were his companions. Was it a miracle? Were they dreaming? Do these things happen in real life? Bhisma, Dron and Vidur were greatly relieved. But the four assailants felt very foolish indeed!

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So the war could not be avoided. Even efforts by Krishna failed. A face to face encounter seemed to be the only solution. But what were the chances of a Pandav victory with honesty and truth as their strongest armour? They had nothing to match the military might of the Kauravs, neither in the size of the army or in the number of well known warriors and expert charioteers. These things counted – men and material. In order to win the Pandavs would have to plan a careful strategy. These thought fleeted across Krishna's mind as he escaped from the court of Hastinapur.

He wanted to get back to the Pandav camp at Upaplaba as soon as possible. Even a moments delay might be disasterius. Krishna had to refuse Kunti and Vidur's request to stay on. The latest developments had to be discussed and preparations started. Only a week was left to complete all arrangements. The well-wishers of the Pandavs understood the predicament and did not insist. When they all came out to bid good-bye Krishna looked dejected. Perhaps it was a natural reaction at leave taking, everybody thought. Nobody knew the real reason.

Actually it was Karna who had caused this sudden change of

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mood. Of all the warriors Krishna found Karna to be the most formidable. His only mission in life was to kill Arjun. He fasted regularly and worshipped his deity every morning and evening praying for success. Not a single day elapsed when this thought was away from his mind. It was not only a difficult job to save Arjun from the determined Karna but almost impossible.

In spite of some admirable qualities Karna happened to be mean and revengeful as far as the Pandavs were concerned. The construction of the house of wax at Varnavat was his idea. His role in the game of dice was not negligible. He wanted the Kauravas to have an outing to Dwaitavana in order to enjoy the sad plight of the five brothers living in exile. In the impending war too he had a prominent role. In fact Duryodhan was so dependent on him that it wouldn't be wrong to say that he was the pivotal figure round whom everything revolved. Perhaps Duryodhan would not have challenged the Pandavs in open combat if it was not for the intense hatred Karna nursed towards the Pandavs and which was now being used by Duryodhan to his own advantage. If there was anyone who would fight the Pandavs with the bitterest grudge—that man was Karna. Taking all these into account Krishna thought of a plan. Suppose he was to win Karna over and lure him away from the Kauravs? That would put an end to all problems. But Karna had a mind of his own. It did not seem likely that he would change sides. Perhaps Krishna might succeed only partly.

His hatred for the Pandavs sprang from the secret of his birth, the actual facts of which were not known to Karna. Now the time had come to expose the closely guarded secret. That would do the Pandavs a world of good, not to speak of saving Arjun. Krishna decided that he would tell Karna the truth, reveal to him that Arjun was his younger brother. In fact all the Pandavs were his brothers. This knowledge was sure to melt him. Of course there would be a conflict between affection and duty. Perhaps hatred would turn to love. He would not regard Arjun as his enemy. Love for a brother would melt his heart, his aim would slip. The more Krishna thought about it, the better it seemed. That was the best defence the Pandavs could have.

Kunti was naturally the best person for the job, even though the admission would be awkward for her. Karna was her first born, born out of wedlock. Afraid of the scandal and the social stigma she had discarded the baby, floated it down the river. After all these years

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how could she claim him ? She has forfeited the right. But no matter how embarrassing she would have to make a clean breast of it so that the very foundations of Karna's life would fall like a house of cards.

So, let Kunti use her motherly tears for a tactical advantage, take him in her arms, flood him with the affection he had been denied all his life, make up for long years of neglect. Nothing is unfair in war, so any method to undermine Karna's hatred would be welcome. Once he was told of his true identity his anger and envy would be washed away. But then, the time was opportune. Krishna would have to initiate the process, he might not have another chance for a heart to heart talk. Instantly he decided on the course of action. It did not take him more than a few seconds to come to a conclusion.

Karna was among the people who had come to bid him good bye. The abortive attack in the court had cast a gloom and he looked guilty as he dared not come close to Krishna. In fact Krishna too was determined to avoid him. But after deciding on the new plan he looked at Karna directly and was sorry to find the unfortunate man looking quite crest-fallen.

Karna responded to his loving gaze by a faint smile. Krishna climbed down from his chariot and held out his hand. 'Come on Karna', he asked him to join him. 'Let us not have bad feelings. I love you as much as I love Arjun. Come along. I need you.'

As though waiting for this signal Karna followed him to the chariot. He was indeed sorry for what had happened at the court and was keen to make amends. Krishna too was pleased, he did not think Karna would oblige him so readily. So reconciled and cheerful both of them mounted the chariot.

Raising a cloud of dust the chariot raced ahead. When they were well past the city limits Krishna turned to Karna. "I have something to tell you", he said tenderly. "You know Karna, it pains me to see you at daggers drawn with the Pandavs who have not harmed you in any way. But you always rejoice at their misfortune. This should not be so. You are not aware that they are your brothers. You are Kunti's son, born before she was married. As the first born you have claims on the throne. So the rights for which Yudhisthir is fighting really belong to you, morally and legally."

When he paused Karna was absolutely dumb-founded. It was an incredible story to say the least. For a few moments he was utterly confused. He did not want to believe it at first but his world had already crumbled. So Parasuram was right when he had sus-

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pected him to be a ksatriya. Instantly everything changed—he was left with a bitter taste in the mouth. So he was Kunti's son. His known world lay in ruins. He felt overwhelmed with sadness. A little later when he spoke his voice was hoarse, "If I am to believe you Krishna then let me say that my real identity has been severed after my birth. I am the son of Adhiratha and that I consider to be the only truth."

Taking him into his arms Krishna kissed his head. "This is hardly the time to be resentful. Come with me to the Pandav camp. They will stand by you and also the Vrishnis—you will claim the throne. Yudhisthir will hold the royal canopy over your head, you will have Draupadi at your service. All the Yadava clans will be on your side. We will have a grand coronation for you, fit for the emperor of the world.

It was a new experience for Karna. His first reaction was one of loneliness and grief. All these years he had withstood many ups and downs but the words of Krishna at one stroke turned everything topsy turvy. With tears freely flowing he pleaded. "Don't tempt me any more with a mother's true affection. It will only weaken my resolve. Don't make me waver in my duty. Let me be my mother Radha's son."

Krishna smiled. 'Forget the past mistakes. Now you know where you stand. Consider Pandav interests as your own now. You had acted against them because you did not know the truth." "For god's sake, don't mislead me", Karna interrupted him. "I can't help what I'm doing. I am not going to forsake Duryodhan for all the world. I won't."

He embraced Krishna and with a heavy heart dismounted from the chariot.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Early winter was considered the best time for going to war. In the orchards the fruits ripen, the rivers and lakes are full, the pastures are green. The roads are dry. There is no scarcity of food even for cattle and horses. People can work for longer hours without feeling exhausted. The season was just right. So Krishna announced the date of the battle without delay: it was to begin on the auspicious eleventh day of the moon in the month of Agrahayana.

A number of informers were employed to bring the latest news of the enemy front. Secret arrangements were made. Krishna offered increased pay and awards to the spies some of whom were to frequent the enemy camp pretending to be deaf and dumb.

What worried Krishna was the unfair advantage the Kauravs seemed to be having. They had larger army hence opening a number of fronts would pose no problem for them. But more than that he was apprehensive of Bhisma who single handed was capable of wiping out seven large battlions. In fact he had assured Duryodhan that he was going to annihilate the entire Pandav army in a day. This was no idle threat. Naturally, Krishna spent sleepless nights. What added to his worry was the fact that Bhisma was not like ordinary mortals. He would not die unless he wanted it himself. Even the king of the gods was powerless to harm him. He could only be handled by clever strategy. But for the life of him Krishna could not think of how that could be achieved.

Hours were spent in deep meditation. Krishna tried to weigh the advantages against the odds. True, Bhisma held the Pandavs very dear and was annoyed with the old king Dhritarastra. Yet his obligation to the Kauravs put him in a very uncomfortable position. Even though he did not mean harm he was duty bound to the other party too. And he had a strong sense of duty. How then were the Pandavs to be saved?

Finding Krishna so preoccupied Yudhisthir voiced his own dismay, "The invincible Bhisma has been appointed the Commander-

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in-Chief. Even with our best efforts we are not likely to succeed against him. Now I see the futility of it all! Oh, why did I hanker after the throne! I might as well give up the idea."

Krishna tried to cheer him up. "Don't lose heart your majesty. I have the formidable 'Pasupata' capable of destroying the three worlds."

Bhim agreed. "The sons of Dhritarastra had better start counting their days."

"Well," Krishna was amused at his enthusiasm, "a divine weapon should not be used against the people. It is only to be directed against an adversary. But I was thinking of the invincible Bhisma."

Krishna had the enviable power to remain unperturbed under the most adverse situation. But even he seemed worried about the outcome of the war. Yudhisthir, already flustered now said desperately, "What can we do now?"

Krishna did not answer at first. He looked placid, even confident, with his natural insight into the strange ways of life he smiled and said very casually. "Diplomacy, my dear, diplomacy. We have to use diplomacy to overpower Bhisma, Dron, Kripa and Karna. We might even kill them, for all you know."

"Diplomacy again?" Yudhisthir did not sound enthusiastic.

His tone irritated Krishna, "Yes, your majesty. You can't set the wheel of politics in motion by your idealism least of all during a time of crisis. Values and ideals are all right in normal day to day existence but not in the context of politics and warfare. Ideals have to be adjusted depending on time, place and people. Idealism has a role in social policy but politics is determined purely by self-interest. Social policy is directed towards the greatest good of the greatest number but the only aim of politics is victory at any cost. Even a virtuous king like Ramchandra had strayed from the path of fair play during battle and killed innocent Bali for his own interest. Think of how Meghnad was killed. Did Laksman abide by the accepted ethics? I tell you, your majesty, there is nothing called principle in warfare. Victory is all that matters and for that end all the means are justified. Men will be men with all their faults and weaknesses. In politics we have to take into account such qualities along with defects which make up a man's character."

Completely floored, Yudhisthir sighed and kept quiet Finally he said, "I do not get it."

"I only wanted to warn you, my virtuous king. The ways of

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politics are indeed complex. You are a man of principle, you value dharma. But do you know that dharma takes on different colours depending on circumstances? You know how the ancient sages have defined dharma as a multi-faceted concept. Even contrary actions can be justified by dharma. Besides exceptions become the rule in an emergency. In warfare and in politics policies are basically framed with an eye to expediency. No single principle can be effective in the battle-field. You have to compromise at every step, play hide and seek with your own conscience."

"In a way this is a reflection on my inadequate leadership", said Yudhisthir sadly. "But then a war minus principles would not be a civilised war but a jungle warfare."

Ignoring his observation Krishna went on, "As I was saying, truth and falsehood are strange concepts—they frequently overlap. Falsehood may sometimes bring about good results as truth may lead to disaster. So one can never be sure which is which. However, as I see it, it is never wrong to resort to falsehood for a good cause."

It appeared to be a perfect argument and Yudhisthir did not know how to refute. Yet a feeling of unease persisted.

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The two armies faced each other in the ground by the river Hiranmavati in Kuruksetra. The Pandav army took position facing east. The soldiers had different kinds of uniform so that one could distinguish at a glance. Flags and colourful banners fluttered in the breeze. The rumble of chairots, neighing of horses, trumpeting of elephants, clatter of weapons and other noises turned the battlefield into one poised for action. The moving men and animals threw up so much dust that sunlight was dimmed.

On the appoined day, at the appointed time the trumpets sounded announcing the commencement of the battle, followed by loud blowing of conches. The soldiers cheered lustily. Excitement ran high.

From the Pandav side the famous 'Panchajanya' was blown by Krishna — signalling the army to charge. The soldiers were already aiming their weapons and getting ready to surge ahead. The tempo began mounting till it reached a fever pitch.

Amid all this cacophony suddenly Yudhisthir, to the astonishment of all left his armour, dismounted and walked towards the Kaurav formation, regardless of the fury his action evoked among the soldires.

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At a signal from Krishna, Bhim and Arjun followed him. Nobody had an inkling of what was happening except Krishna who with his usual quizzical smile looked on.

The Kaurav soldiers began to talk, wondering what led the Pandav chief to discard his armour and walk up to the enemy. Some said he was afraid, as always. It was his cowardice which had led his borthers to such a pass. Now faced with the grim spectacle of war he had lost his nerve and was running to Bhisma to stop it all.

This unexpected turn of events confused Duryodhan as well. He was curious and suspicious of the motive. Perhaps the virtuous Yudhisthir was reluctant to shed the blood of innocent people. His unwillingness to take up arms had brought him to Bhisma with another appeal for truce. It opened up the delightful prospect of another term of forest exile for the Pandavs.

Regardless of the ripples he was causing the eldest Pandav approched Bhisma, went round his chariot before he bowed at his feet. Bhim and Arjun followed suit. With folded hands they sought Bhisma's permission and blessings to begin their battle — a fight for a noble cause.

Evidently pleased, Bhisma took the three brothers in his arms, "My dear children", he said with remorse, "circumstances do not permit me to be on the side of truth and justice. My sincere apologies. I am duty bound to serve Duryodhan — I am a lifelong slave. Only death can set me free. However, if there is anything I can do for you, feel free to ask."

"Grandfather, you have always been kind to us." Yudhisthir spoke reverentially "We are sure that no harm can come to us through you. Would you do us a favour. Could you please tell us the way we can overpower you."

"No mortal man can kill me", said Bhisma, "since I am specially endowed with the power of dying only when I want it. Death can not touch me unless I want it. But let me tell you something. I won't harm a man who has changed sex, Sikhandi for instance. I wouldn't retaliate if he attacks. But wait for the time. Krishna will tell you at the right moment."

They took their leave and approached Dron. Like Bhisma Dron appologised for his being in the enemy camp. He was asked the same question : "I'll remain invincible as long as I am armed. I'll be vulnerable only when I discard my weapons on hearing some unpleasant news." They were told.

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The ritual was repeated twice with Kripa and Salya. After paying respects to the senior warriors the three Pandavs withdrew to their position.

This was a bright idea thought up by Krishna—using good manners as a weapon for serving a political end. To give it a look of spontaneity he chose Yudhisthir whose sincerety was above reproach. Gentle and modest by nature, Yudhisthir played into Krishna's hands and came out with flying colours. He not only won the hearts of the mighty elders but also extracted the secrets of how to end their lives. It was a masterly stroke — it assured the victory of the Pandavs in a long run. Krishna could not help being delighted, with new insight he could penetrate deeper into human nature the realisation of which made him conscious of his own power. This confidence made him venture into new areas where his fine intellect could be applied effectively.

Then the war began with deafening roar, Bhisma led the charge which sent the Pandav army flying helter skelter. Other Kauravs chased them and killed them mercilessly. Hundreds of horses, elephants, charioteers lay dead. The speed with which the havoc was wrought had even Krishna worried. Yudhisthir was overcome with remorse. "It is all my doing my friend," he wailed to Krishna, "show us a way. Please tell me how we can restrain Bhisma".

Arjun was sitting close by looking distressed. He was much too devoted to Bhisma to take up arms against him. Krishna had noticed his reluctance and gave him a scornful look. His unwillingness to fight was a kind of revolt against himself. It was unpardonable. Arjun cringed before that look. He was almost at the point of tears.

Krishna beyond himself with rage decided to teach Arjun a leasson. He spoke to Yudhisthir choosing his words carefully, "You need not repent your majesty. It is not you but your third brother who has caused this misery. It is his love for the Kauravs which has resulted in your losses. He wouldn't fight against Bhisma. Can't you see how he is keeping aloof ? But look at Bhisma. He has not let his affection get the upper hand. He is on a killing spree. Arjun the mighty warrior is powerless before him. For shame! If you permit me, I'll lead the charge against Bhisma. I won't have any moral qualms to kill the enemies of the Pandavs."

He was highly excited, his eyes blazed.

The harsh admonitions did not fail to produce the desired effect. Arjun, his facial muscles taut, his face distorted with anger cried with

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all the pride of his manhood concentrated in his voice, "That would hardly be necessary, my friend, Restrain your temper. I don't want you to go back on your word. You've flung enough insults already. I deserve to be punished for my lapse. Let me made amends. I swear by my son that I'll stick to my vow."

This was exactly what Krishna wanted. He mounted the chariot with a happy heart. His sharp conch sound filled the entire battle ground.

Nine days of intense fighting went on yet the Pandavs could do nothing to stop the deadly onslaught led by Bhisma. Even Arjun failed to make any headway. With the loss of men and materials mounting every day a pall of gloom spread over the Pandav camp. It left Yudhisthir dejected, Arjun confused, Bhim surprised and Krishna uneasy. Their allies were also at a loss.

It was like a nightmare. Like a falling meteor Bhisma sprang on them catching them unaware. His method was swift. He took his adversaries by surprise and overpowered them before they realised what was happening. He changed his tactics every day, going in for new and unique formations.

But the prolonged strain was beginning to take its toll. Bhisma was getting tired, there were dark patches under his eyes.

Gradually he grew listness. Other strong men Duryodhan, Duhsasan, Karna and Sakuni made a protective circle round him as he led the army.

Meanwhile the trusted informers were doing their work. They kept Krishna abrest with the latest developments. He was told that Bhisma was hit by remorse. He refused to have anything to do with spilling the blood of his own kith and kin. He was disgusted and had no desire to go on living.

The news was received with mixed emotions. A strange smile twisted Krishna's lips as he muttered to himself, "It is all pre-destined". Instantly he was on his guard. He did not want anybody to know what was going in his mind.

In the soft lamp light his quickly changing moods were not apparent to the five brothers who watched him intently. Yudhisthir at last broke the silence, "My good friend, show us the way. It seems victory will elude us as long as Bhisma is alive. What should we do ?"

Krishna, aware that he was treading on thin ice spoke carefully. "Your majesty", he said, "Bhisma is tired with constant fighting. He

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is fast approaching his last moment, how fast would depend entirely on Arjun."

Arjun looked up. All these days he was torn between love and duty. His sense of duty compelled him to oppose the grand old man but his mind revolted against the idea. Looking sad and guilty he confessed, "Pardon me Krishna, How can I aim my deadly shots at the man who has brought me up with so much love, has played with me when I was a child, sung lullabies, I can't, I simply can't. Let him destroy as much as he wishes, I won't resist."

Krishna appreciated his feelings but this was no time for idle sentiments. So he put on one of his quizzical smiles and said, "Bravo, spoken like a true ksatriya who had once vowed to destroy Bhisma. But you did not mean it obviously. It was more in jest. But then, you know you'd be called a coward if you don't keep your vow. Moreover you will disappoint your brothers. The name of the man yielding the deadly Gandeev will be mud and it will be too much for me to bear. I'll have no other way but to commit suicide."

This was an unexpected blow. Arjun stared at him in disbelief. Watching Arjun's reaction Krishna was secretly delighted. He pursuded him tenderly, "Fight on Arjun, but have Sikhandi before you. At the very sight of him Bhisma will lay down arms. That will be the right time for Sikhandi to shoot which will not kill him of course. He will receive his death blow from you. You will also shoot, only the old man will think it to be Sikhandi."

Next morning the Pandavas proceeded with making an impregnable formation and spreading all over the battlefield. Duryodhan was apprehensive, for they had surrounded Bhisma in such a way that no help could reach him. Then Krishna signalled to Arjun to charge with Sikhandi in front. Bhisma knew that the end was near. Yet he faught desperately, his tired body was finding it difficult to carry on. He was distracted by the wails all around. The fact that he was not on the side of dharma continued to dampen his spirits. His hands shook, he could not aim properly, he kept missing his target. In fact he was so exhausted that he had to stop to get his breath back. Duryodhan watched him from a distance but there was no way to reach him.

Meanwhile Arjun's chariot was coming closer. As soon as Bhisma saw Shikhandi perched on it he threw down his arms. A shower of arrows flew towards him and pierced him all over his body. Then he realised that it was none else but Arjun and launched his specially powered weapon 'Shakti' without delay. Arjun blew it to pieces.

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Bhisma was about to jump from his chariot with his shield for a face to face combat when a volly of arrows stopped him. He was completely immobilised and the arrows did not even let him sit. He tumbled headlong and collapsed on the ground.

The Kauravs rushed to his fallen body in dismay. The sight drew tears even from the bravest of the warriors. A sad and dejected Arjun went up to the dying warrior to pay his last respects. All his brothers accompanied him. Tears streamed down their cheeks as they silently went round his body, begged forgiveness and quietly went back to their camp.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After the fall of Bhisma it now became imperative for Karna to enter the fray. His presence would revitalise the Kaurava army, spur them forward with renewed vigour. He was a sworn enemy of Arjun which was a matter of grave concern. It put Krishna in the difficult position of chalking out a new strategy. The story of his birth had only aggravated his hatred for Arjun. In fact he had even turned down the dying Bhisma's last request. Sullen and indignant he had told the old man, "Most respected sir, it is I who have sparked the fire, and used Duryodhan for annihilating Arjun. As Krishna is committed to the Pandavas so am I to Duryodhan. I will use all my resources to help him."

Bhisma in spite of his great physical agony attempted to appease. "But they are your own flesh and blood, Karna, should a brother kill his own brother? It is a sin to have any hostile feeling towards Arjun. Forget your envy and ego—work jointly for what is just and fair."

Karna kept quiet. Nothing that Bhisma said could melt his iron resolve. His hatred for Arjun grew stronger every day. Moreover the possession of the formidable weapon named after lightening gave him an extra advantage. He was well-equipped to face Arjun and never parted with this weapon. This was an additional cause of Krishna's worry.

The hostility went back to the time of Draupadi's wedding. Her refusal had hurt Karna so deeply that he never got over it. So in a way defeating Arjun would also mean a lesson for the proud Draupadi. He would never have a moment's peace till the score was settled in an open encounter.

Even Kunti's appeal did not have any effect. Karna could excuse all the four brothers but not Arjun. He remained his permanent rival. In fact the reason why Karna was fighting this war was because of Arjun. In a way the great battle was reduced to a battle between two formidable opponents—Karna and Arjun—a struggle for supremacy. The entire Kaurava strategy was framed with this end in view—to destroy Arjun. To counter this challenge Krishna was forced to employ all his resources and cunning.

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At this point Kuntak, the chief informer arrived. He had important news to convey to Krishna. With folded hands he said, "The fall of Bhisma has broken Duryodhan. Now he is scared of the Pandavs who could overpower Bhisma endowed with the divine power to choose his own death. So he thinks that nothing is impossible for the Pandavs. Now Dron has replaced Bhisma. It was Karna's suggestion. However Duryodhan does not have much faith in him for Dron being too indulgent to the five brothers might not want to kill them. Under the circumstances Karna has advised him to catch Yudhisthir alive, make him a prisoner and force him to another game of chess!"

"Is that so?" Krishna began to laugh.

Kuntak was a little offended. "I thought it was a serious piece of information for which you'd congratulate me. Yet you laugh."

Krishna said nothing. He looked amused and let Kuntak go on. "Well, as we all know Yudhisthir is too much of a decent gentleman to turn down the challenge. He never refuses anybody. But that would mean inviting disaster. Another game of chess!"

Krishna said cheerfully. "You are right Kuntak. I agree with you. What do you think this would mean?"

Totally taken aback, Kuntak hesitated. Then he said, "Well I would say Yudhisthir should be carefully guarded."

"Anything else?"

For Kuntak the exchange was becoming embarrassing. It was his job to collect information, not to analyse it. In fact, he never bothered about the import of the news. "Well, I really can't say." He fumbled.

"Very well, you may go now."

Kuntak left. Krishna was once again plunged into deep thought. Greed has taken complete hold of Duryodhan to the extent that he had embarked on the absurd plan of taking Yudhisthir alive. Little did he know that Yudhisthir was a changed man now, more concerned about victory at any cost. His only dharma was now the duty of a ksatriya. He has even supported unfair dealings in this war of nerves. He strayed from a strictly moral course when he encouraged Salya to betray Karna. The way he extracted the secrets of killing Bhisma and Dron was not very ethical either. In future too, he would have to resort to duplicity. He had come to realise that there were differences between the duties of a king and ethical values. Nobody can mislead him now. So Krishna was more or less free of worry on that account. The Kaurav strategy as chalked out by Karna was

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clearly a subterfuge to bring Arjun within striking distance. Arjun would stay close to Yudhisthir for his protection giving Karna a good opportunity to fling his missile at him. That was a clever plan—Krishna could not help admitting it. But Dron saw through the game and determined to outwit him. He said, "The best way to get Yudhisthir would be to remove Arjun from his side. You should try to get Arjun away. Then consider the task as done."

There was truth in this observation. So even though he was disappointed, Karna had to agree. Even the gods would be powerless if Yudhisthir had his third brother to help him. Krishna was grateful to Dron for the suggestion of separating the two Pandavs. Now Duryodhan found himself caught in his own trap.

Krishna could visualise the scene very well—Duryodhan the clever hunter inching towards the prey. The prey was within reach—all he had to do was to fire the shot. Poor Duryodhan. Krishna was sorry for him, he did not know what destiny had in store for him.

If the Kauravs were to follow Dron they would have to open new fronts and accelerate the charge for which the two crack regiments—the Samsaptak guards and the Narayani brigade would have to be used. For Arjun it was child's play to annihilate the two brigades and what a terrible blow that would be to the Kauravs. They were in no position to fight without these two. How stupid of Duryodhan to underestimate Arjun. Krishna wondered at his short-sightedness. Arjun possessed such wonderful weapons—all gifts from gods—that even the mighty Narayani brigade was powerless before him.

The five Pandavs entered the room. It did not surprise Krishna. He was expecting them any minute. In the subdued glare of the lamp their expressions could not be seen. They took their seats silently. Evidently they had something in their mind. Finally Arjun blurted out, "It seems they want our eldest brother to sit for another game of chess, what are we going to do about it?"

Krishna was amused, "Who is going to get him?"

"Why, Dron himself."

"Well, he is only keeping his word".

"We don't understand."

"Dron has planned it only for the good of the Pandavs."

"Krishna is right", put in Yudhisthir. "There is a loop-hole somewhere. That is what we don't understand."

Bhim and Arjun too looked puzzled. Krishna stared through the

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window out into the dark night. Then he spoke slowly. "It is a peculiar strategy. Your majesty, you have no fear. But your third brother's life seems to be in jeopardy."

The Pandavs looked at one another. Their shadows thrown by the lamp assumed ominous proportions. Nobody spoke. After a while Yudhisthir broke the silence. "You are not serious, you can't be." He pleaded, "Are you annoyed with us?"

Unperturbed, Krishna replied, "I am only telling you the truth. It will not be safe to keep Arjun with you. It will only incite the wicked Kauravs and Karna. It might lead to Arjun's death."

His answer seemed even more bewildering. Even the last vestige of hope was ebbing away. Yudhisthir, sad and dejected could not find a ray of hope anywhere.

Arjun however was the least bit disturbed though he was curious to know if Krishna had thought of any solution.

'Yes I have', Krishna was confident.

Yudhisthir looked up in surprise, "What is it?" he asked.

Krishna turned his hypnotic gaze on the five brothers who were intently listening to him. They were so loyal, so trusting that it was a pleasure for Krishna to be with them. He knew that they would never question him and do exactly what he wanted them to do. "Tomorrows battle is going to be decisive. So I would suggest we have Dhrishtadyumna, Bhim, Satyaki and Abhimanyu with your majesty. They should be able to protect you. That will leave Arjun free to fight the Samsaptak and Narayani brigade led by the king of Trigarta." .....

Much relieved Yudhisthir thanked Krishna and took his leave.

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After wiping out the two invincible brigades Arjun was on his way to the camp. The sun had already set, the western sky was still a blaze of colour. "I should feel happy," said Arjun to himself, "But why do I have this heavy feeling as though I have lost a near and dear one." His eyes were moist. For no reason he thought of his favourite son Abhimanyu and he had an acute premonition of danger.

He was informed that Dron was making a circular formation. None but Abhimanyu knew how to get into that formation but unfortunately he did not know the secret of coming out. Suddenly Arjun had a nightmarish vision of Abhimanyu lying in a pool of blood—

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his head severed from his body. Panic-stricken he asked, "My friend I'm very upset for my son. Is he in good health? I am so apprehensive that I can't breathe." The news of Abhimanyu's death had reached Krishna already. Naturally he too was upset. But he recovered with great effort and said casually, "Don't worry. Your brothers are hale and hearty."

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He paused and went on, "Remember my friend nothing in this world is everlasting. Yet men are driven crazy with grief at the passing away of a dear one. A true warrior never laments, he answers with his arms."

"But why do you say so?" Arjun was worried.

"In case you may overlook it, you are a ksatriya, it is your job to fight. Under any circumstances a true ksatriya must not stray from his ordained path—that would be the worst sin. I am indeed ashamed to remind you, but I must pull you up."

The roundabout answer did not satisfy Arjun. Glumly he sank into silence. When they reached the camp it was dark. There were no lights, no sounds of welcome, no blowing of conches. Nobdy came to receive him, to give him a heroe's welcome. No doorman was there, no soldier, no officer of high rank. The rumble of the chariot usually brought Abhimanyu rushing out—but he was not to be seen. The all-pervading silence troubled Arjun.

He jumped from the chariot with a scene of gloom, the soldiers lining the way did not dare to look up. As Arjun approached some of them drew back avoiding his eyes.

Arjun made a dash for Yudhisthir's chamber. Krishna made no attempt to restrain him. The four brothers sat lamenting, their moist eyes glistened. They were startled to find Arjun there. Draupadi burst into loud sobs as she saw him.

Yudhisthir struck his own forehead in agony. "It is my fault, all my fault. I have killed the poor boy. We sent an innocent boy to the lion's den. Punish me, brother, I deserve it."

Arjun heard the details in stunned silence. His eyes were dry. Anger welled up till he was ready to set fire to the whole world. He was told of how heroically the gallant Abhimanyu had fought the unequal battle, seven against one. As he listened his face grew livid, he swore eternal vengeance. His change frightened even Krishna

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who tried to make him see reason. "Please, have patience. Don't let your anger destroy the world."

But Arjun was in no condition to pay heed. He picked up his famous bow and swore hysterically, "I swear by my bow that my son's kiler Jayadratha will meet his end before sunset tomorrow. If I can't then I'll jump into flames to end my own life." His voice had a ring of cold finality which startled Krishna.

Was he out of his mind? No wonder the shock was shattering but this was madness. The rest of the Pandavs too over-whelmed with grief were unaware of the terrible ordeal the next day. Krishna was annoyed with them. It was only a few hours before sunrise. A lot of preparations had to be done.

It would be foolish to underestimate Jayadratha, the king of Sindhu Saubir. He happened to be the brother-in-law of Duryodhan and a warrior of good standing. The Kauravs would spare no pains to protect him. Moreover they would like to make full use of Arjun's vow. The death of Arjun would make it easier for the enemy to finish off the rest of the Pandavs. The war would be over. Defeat of the Pandavs would mean an end to Krishna's long-cherished dream. So, the situation looked quite bleak and Krishna grew restless.

His informers brought the details of the Kaurav strategy. Dron would have a fortification made of chariots followed by another barricade at the centre of which Jayadratha and his army would be poised for attack. Dron himself will guard the first barricade. Close by six other warriors including Karna would stand by.

It was a fool proof plan. Krishna could not imagine how he would save his dear friend's life. If need be he would also take up arms, though that would mean breaking his promise. But situation always determines the course of action. The battle next day would be of a different nature, it revolved round two lives. It would be quite unprecedented. No normal rules would apply, yet Krishna was torn by conflict.

His friendship with Arjun went back to many years. They had been together through thick and thin. He depended on him, trusted him more than anybody. Was he going to lose him because of a silly mistake? He could not take it any more. Was it pre-ordained. Otherwise why would Arjun take such a terrible vow? And why did he promise not to take up arms in this battle?

Krishna spent the whole night restlessly prowling about the room, hoping for some miracle. At the first light of dawn he saw Arjun

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taking a dip in the river and saluting the morning sun. He stood facing east, as though absorbing the energy of the sun. With determined steps he then walked up to a phallic symbol of Shiva, the linga, bathed in early sunlight. Arjun stood very still obviously saying his prayers. Then he went down on his knees to present his offerings with folded hands. As Krishna watched the entire procedure from a distance he gasped in wonder. A strange spectacle met his eyes. The sun's rays formed a spiral and entered Arjun's body. Instantly the serene sage like frame glowed with a divine grace. It was an aspect of Arjun Krishna was not aware of. His admiration was mixed with a feeling of ease as though a great weight was lifted. Now he knew that Arjun was in complete command of his powers. When he took the vow it was not done in a sudden impulse. He knew very well what he was doing. True his son's loss was a shattering blow but he was fully aware of the consequences. Now, at long last, Krishna could breathe a sigh of relief.

When it was time to set out for battle Arjun silently mounted the chariot. His face was composed but grave. No words were spoken. It was the lull before the storm and what an unprecedented gale it was going to be!

They reached the battle-ground where the Kaurava army was already in formation. Eyes flashing in anger Arjun took his deadly bow 'the Gandeev' and within the batting of an eye-lid showered a volley of shots. The cavalry, the infantry, the elephants and charioteers were in disarry and the way was open for him to enter the circular barricade. Arjun drove on effortlessly, got down to pay homage to his teacher Drona who was guarding the entrance and before Drona had time to react penetrated into the impregnable barrier. Before Dron had time to aim his arrows Arjun was out of sight. All the while, Krishna silently maneuvering the chariot was admiring the skill with which the difficult feat was achieved without any harm to Dron. Arjun was bound to come out triumphant—he was sure.

Meanwhile Arjun charged madly, sending volley after volley of shots chasing his main target Jayadratha. It made Duryodhan's blood run cold. Neither Karna nor the other warriors could resist Arjun's onward march. It was as though the formidable god Shiva had begun his dance of death. No power on earth was equal to match it. Arjun broke through barricade after barricade, Bhim and Satyaki providing him able support. They seemed possessed and fought on with unabashed vigour, striking terror through the bravest of Kaurav hearts.

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It was becoming impossible for them to save Jayadratha. Bhurisraba was killed. Karna was badly injured, pierced by hundreds of arrows. Not a single warrior was in a fit condition to fight. Dron was tired, so was Sakuni. Blood was gushing out of Duryodhan's limbs and the braggart Duhsasan had also been taught a lesson. The entire Kaurav army was demoralised. Poor Jayadratha did not know which way to turn.

The day was gradually coming to a close. The shadows lengthened, the forests were already dark, the strong light of the day began to fade. Krishna was growing increasingly worried, but Arjun was not the least bit perturbed. Sensing Krishna's apprehensions he remarked, "You need not worry. Most of the enemy warriors are too exhausted to put up a fight—their soldiers are in disarray. Most of them have put down their arms. This is the right time to strike. Take me to Jayadratha. I will pierce through the barricades, rush past their elephants and horsemen and Jayadratha will breathe his last before sundown."

Considerably cheered by these words Krishna blew his conch. Arjun got his bow ready and twanged the string to the great terror of the opponents. They rushed on, crushing all resistence. There was pandemonium in the enemy rank. Soon Jayadratha was sighted and was greeted by simultaneous war cries from the Pandavs. To stop it Krishna's conch warned the victim who was already cornered. He appealed desperately but neither Duryodhan nor Karna could come to his rescue. They were already too exhausted to stand the onslaught. Desperately Jayadratha charged but in an instant he lost his charioteer and the wheels rolled away. Arjun hit at his weapons first so that his bows and axe dropped to the ground. Then with the speed of lightening his head was severed from the body.

The sun set beyond the horizon.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The death of Jayadratha broke the spirit of the Kauravs. particularly that of Duryodhan. The castles he had been building in the air came tumbling down. From where did Arjun acquire such military skill which could put even the great god Indra to shame! In fact his valour far excelled that of Bhim. In a matter of seconds he had the mighty warriors discard their weapons. He could resist their combined attack—which was an impossible feat.

His muscles aching, tears streaming down his cheeks, Duryodhan sank deeper and deeper into despair. Suddenly he came to his senses and sat up. Why should he keep thinking of his greatest enemy, the most formidable hurdle in the way of achieving his ambition? If only he could wipe out Arjun from the face of the earth. But during the day he was invincible. There was no single warrior among the Kauravs able to take him on. Duryodhan felt helpless.

His friend Karna tried to sympathise. "My dear friend, we have been in the wrong all along," he said, "we tried to poison them, burn them to death, cheated at the game of chess and humiliated our cousin's wife in open court. Last but not the least we have failed to keep our promise. All these are acts of sin. Luck seems to be against us. Defeat stares us in the face. Nevertheless we will fight till our last breath knowing that victory will be beyond our grasp."

Karna's outburst was quite unexpected. Duryodhan let out a derisive laugh! "So you too have become a man of dharma", he mocked, "You are following the footsteps of Bhisma. Yet it was you who had incited me to battle. Just because now I am in the receiving end you want to desert me and join your brothers? You are ready to forgive them. I am your unworthy friend, very well then, you go your own way and I'll go mine. I am getting out tonight to launch a surprise attack on the Pandavs and Panchals."

"I hope you know what you are doing", cried Dron, "I would advise you to be more circumspect."

"I do not care for your advice" Duryodhan exclaimed, "There is no time to be lost. Jayadratha's death must be avenged. Blood for blood. I won't settle far less. I am going out right now."

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He rushed out leaving Dron and Karna staring at one another in dismay.

Meanwhile in the Pandav camp celebrations were going on in full swing. Draupadi was tending Arjun's bruises. Krishna was giving Subhadra the details of how Jayadratha was killed. Most of the others were resting. This was an ideal moment for a surprise attack. Duryodhan ordered his army not to go back to their barracks but to charge.

However the news of the surprise attack reached Krishna whose informers had infiltrated the enemy rank. Was Duryodhan out of his mind – wondered Krishna. No sane person would think of an assault by night. This was suicidal.

The more he thought about it the more meaningless it seemed. Such a mad pursuit would not lead to any good. Perhaps it was in his stars. Destiny was driving Duryodhan to his own destruction.

It was a moon-lit night. Outside the camp the vast grounds stretched as far as the eyes could see. But objects in the distance looked hazy. It would be difficult to take aim in this light which increased the chances of a large number of casualty. Perhaps this was the intended objective – to put Arjun in such a position when he would not be able to strike. However things did not look well to Krishna. He was apprehensive, particularly because Karna was in possession of the formidable weapon Vasavastra. Under any circumstances Arjun must not face him – more so now that he was battle weary. He needed rest.

The most suitable person for conducting a battle by night was the son of Bhim – Ghatotkach. The child of an aborigine mother, he was endowed with magical powers including that of camouflage. Like a cat his eyes glowed in the dark. None of the Kauravs could surpass him in the art of night warfare. Moreover his presence would boost the morale of the Pandav soldiers when they had a warrior like Karna leading the enemy. Only Arjun and the son of Bhim were Karna's match. Krishna had no idea of the outcome but he could visualise one possibility. It was not very clear but it gave him reason to feel optimistic.

There was a good chance that Karna would use his ultimate weapon against Ghatotkach to defend himself against his swift attack. There was no doubt in Krishna's mind that Bhim's son would put Karna in a tight spot and Karna would be obliged to use the weapon intended for Arjun. He only hoped that this would happen, because

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this tragic event would save Arjun's life. Ghatotkach's sacrifice would not be in vain.

Without losing any more time he sent for Bhim's brave son. The dark and ugly Ghatotkach rushed to the battle field in great glee, leaving Krishna with a strange smile twisting his lips.

The silence of the night was shattered with the rattle and clatter of advancing vehicles, the sound of war drums and finally the screams of dying men and animals. All hell broke loose. The beautiful moonlit night was at once transformed into a scene of nightmare.

Ghatotkach the terrible was all over the place, chasing the enemy soldiers who fled helter skelter. Karna, angry like a snake flung volleys of arrows but Ghatatkach swiftly changed position taking advantage of the dark. His flying missiles hit Karna from all directions, even his chariot was damaged. Driven to the corner Karna was desperate. He had to do something. How could he, the great Karna accept such ignoble defeat from a mere lad? At last he pulled out the divine weapon meant for Arjun and flung it towards his adversary. It burst like a meteor and the body of Ghatatkach was blown to pieces.

A pall of gloom descended over the Pandav camp. Everybody lamented the loss of Bhim's brave son except Krishna who remained aloof. Inwardly he was happy and relieved. A great load was off his mind. This victory was the beginning of his long-cherished dream. He blew his conch to give vent to his feelings. Others however could not understand why he was rejoicing.

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His idea of forming a just society based on fair play and social justice was about to become true. It was no longer a dream. The way was clear—no power on earth could now stop Arjun in his fight against evil. Virtue was going to come out the winner. In the other camp the stalwarts were either too tired or weak. Psychologically the war had been won. Nothing succeeds like success, as Krishna realised to his great delight.

Even before the onset of the battle he know it would be a decisive war. The conflict between virtue and vice, dharma and lack of dharma gradually reached a point of no return. A bloody war was inevitable. It was a price that had to be paid. There would be tears and sighs; agony and heart-break, but they were inevitable. A blood bath was necessary to wash away all the evil.

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chariot but it was turned down. Infuriated, Arjun cried, "So you are asking me to behave like a ksatriya! Behave like a ksatriya indeed! Think of all the things that you have done—were they befitting a ksatriya? You had humiliated Draupadi, tried to poison Bhim, set fire to the house of lac. What had happened to your ksatriya conscience then, your sense of dharma? And when the seven of you had encircled the young Abhimanyu and drove him to death—were you acting like a true ksatriya? Can you explain your actions? Now suddenly the concept of dharma has struck you and you are crying yourself hoarse. Your double-dealing, deceitful wretch no amount of hypocritical appeal is going to get you anywhere. Get ready to die."

Fuming with rage Arjun pulled the bow string. A flaming arrow pierced Karna's chest and he fell. Arjun's greatest rival was dead at last.

Not much was left to be won now. But the fighting had to continue till the fall of the last enemy. With the killing of Duryodhan the eighteen day battle came to a close.

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Things began to happen in quick succession as though propelled by some invisible hand. Even Krishna felt himself to be a puppet following the dictates of destiny. Everything is pre-determined. The great mindless wheel of time draws everything to it. Nobody was immune from its irresistible pull, each and every person was a plaything, a mere toy in the great stage where time made them dance at will.

The next day's battle was more intense than ever before. Stung to the quick by Duryodhan's words Dron decided to fight till he had the last drop of blood left. He had no desire to go on living. But the fourteen days of ceaseless battle were already taking their toll. He was absolutely fagged out, there were black circles round his eyes, it was becoming increasingly difficult even to lift up the bow. Finally he resigned himself to god and gave up the attempt to resist. Not letting this chance go, Dhristadyumna rushed forward and cut off his head. A great lament filled the air.

The Kaurav camp, already demoralised by a number of set-backs reeled under the latest stroke of misfortune. The mighty Karna was scared and for the first time in his life felt himself to be cornered with no way open for escape. Fate seemed determined to overtake him. He had always fought against his fate but now it seemed to be a futile battle. Depressed and discouraged, he kept telling himself that he must go on, he was the only friend of Duryodhan. He was absolutely alone with all friends and relations gone. So under the circumstances Karna had to stand by him. He had a responsibility.

On the sixteenth day of the battle the long awaited combat with Arjun was about to take place. But it was already late. Perhaps god had conspired against him. Karna resigned himself to the hands of fate. .....

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Then the battle started. Karna and Arjun the eternal rivals stood facing each other, each determined to fight to the last. Soon Karna's bejewelled crown was rolling in the dust, his armour was broken and the shots pierced right through. Yet he continued to wreck havoc, his missiles flying at Krishna and Arjun in such quick succession that they seemed to form a screen. Then Arjun's arrows hit one of the wheels and Karna's chariot was grounded with one wheel broken. Almost in tears he appealed to Arjun to allow him time to pull up the

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chariot but it was turned down. Infuriated, Arjun cried, "So you are asking me to behave like a ksatriya! Behave like a ksatriya indeed! Think of all the things that you have done—were they befitting a ksatriya? You had humiliated Draupadi, tried to poison Bhim, set fire to the house of lac. What had happened to your ksatriya conscience then, your sense of dharma? And when the seven of you had encircled the young Abhimanyu and drove him to death—were you acting like a true ksatriya? Can you explain your actions? Now suddenly the concept of dharma has struck you and you are crying yourself hoarse. Your double-dealing, deceitful wretch no amount of hypocritical appeal is going to get you anywhere. Get ready to die."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

All the eighteen battalions had been wiped out. Kurukshetra looked like a monstrous grave-yard with corpses lying all over the place. Parts of the dresses and ornaments, weapons and armour were scattered everywhere. Vultures and predators fought over the bodies which still retained their warmth and looked handsome even.

The mourners were looking for the bodies, their wild laments filled the air, already heavy with grief. It was death and desolation everywhere. For Yudhisthir it was unbearable. The mothers who had lost their sons, the young women who had lost their husbands came to Yudhisthir and acoused him of genocide. "So you have got back your empire your majesty – this vast graveyard. Was it for this that you had to sacrifice your favourite Abhimanyu and Draupadi all her five sons? Would you be happy now?"

His heart torn with remorse, Yudhisthir came to Krishna. His voice was hoarse as he said, "My friend, I do not have any justification for what I have done! I am a sinner. Now I realise the extent of my sin. I have no desire for my kingdom now. Even happiness has lost its meaning. This is worse. This is truly speaking my defeat. It was a suicidal battle to begin with and I have ended up losing all my relations and friends. Of what use would authority be to me now that I'll rule over a deserted land!"

Krishna too was visibly moved but he kept his cool. However unpleasant it might seem he never forgot that duty came before everything. Now he had one more task to attend to. The warrior community had become so corrupt that the ideals of dharma, of good government were lost sight of. It was Krishna's lifelong ambition to restore dharma and make it functional. For this the man of virtue Yudhisthir seemed to be the ideal person. That was the reason he had been supporting the Pandavs all along, because only the eldest Pandav had the rare quality of providing a synthesis in this strife-torn country, bringing together all members of the four varnas, the brahmin, the ksatriya, the vaisya and the sudra in an attempt to establish the rule of dharma. But now the king himself was so overcome by grief and remorse that he was in no condition to perform what was expected of him. It did not become a man of his moral stature. He was

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behaving like a hysteric old woman. After crossing immense hurdles when success was within sight his entire dream was being threatened by the shallow pool of despondency. After conquering storm-tossed oceans would his fleet be grounded in a bog? Krishna was disapointed. He accosted the king angrily, "May I remined your majesty that this whole thing is a consequence of past action, of Karma. As one sows so he shall reap. You are wild with grief, but try to be reasonable. You did not bring it about. All you did was to fight for a just cause and you have won your territory. Duryodhan's preposterous behaviour forced you to fight. Besides no ksatriya should be ashamed of bloodshed and killing the enemy. That is no sin. Even Manu has said that a ksatriya must respond to challange in a suitable manner. Bloodshed thus becomes inevitable."

But Yudhisthir was inconsolable. "I have no desire to rule" he said sadly. "I am sorry Krishna, I detest this throne, smeared with the blood of my own people."

Krishna spoke with compassion and tenderness, "Your majesty, think of the nine months a mother has to bear a child in her womb. Think of the intense discomfort she has to undergo and the terrible pangs of child birth. It is all for the good of others, of the society. The birth of a child is accompanied by the shedding of blood, so is the birth of a new kingdom. It is not for nothing that a king is annointed with blood during the coronation ceremony."

His words cheered Yudhisthir considerably. His eyes sparkled, his face lost its dejected look. He seemed to get back his confidence. All his sense of guilt seemed to fade. His entire being was enthused with a renewed sense of purpose. "I have complete faith in you, Krishna," he spoke in a tone of dedication, "I have always followed your advice and have got back my inheritence, thanks to your wisdom and skill. All my strength is derived from you—all my virtues and dharma. I am indeed grateful to you, Krishna—grateful beyond words.",

Fondly, Krishna took him in his arms.

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A new era was heralded by the auspicious sounds of conch shells followed by a musical orchestra. Beautiful women stood in rows carrying garlands, sandle paste and other offerings. The palace wore a festive look.

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The throne of Hastinapur which used to be occupied by the blind king and his queen was now going to belong to emperor Yudhisthir and empress Draupadi – by a strange turn of fate. In the happy scene the only exceptions were the ousted king and queen who sat dejected and gloomy. Their eyes however were not dazzled by the spectacular beauty of the coronation. Perhaps it was best for all concerned that one of them was blind and the other wore a blindfold. Otherwise their looks could have set fire to Yudhisthir's empire. But destiny had other plans. One dark page in the history of the land was removed and replaced by a new one on which the name of Yudhisthir, the emperor of Bharat glowed like gold.

Yudhisthir sat on the golden throne inlaid with jewels, facing east. Krishna and Satyaki sat in front of him. Bhim and Arjun held the canopy over his head. Nakul and Sahadeb swayed the fan gently. The erstwhile king and queen sat on an ivory seat with Kunti between them. Kunti looked serene.

The royal priest Dhoumya asked Krishna's permission to begin the proceedings. Krishna gave his consent and blew his celeberated conch as a symbol of approval. The scented water oozing out of the conch was then sprinkled. He then annointed the king with red sandal wood paste which glowed on his forehead like the rays of the rising sun. The brahmins chanted hymns. The people cheered their king. Yudhisthir acknowledged their greetings with pleasure.

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His task completed, Krishna now returned to Dwaraka.

But it was not the same Dwaraka that he had left. There were signs of decay and corruption everywhere. The symptoms were ominous. Krishna was deeply worried about his clansmen. He could see the writing on the wall.

What had happened at Hastinapur was being repeated here – the same picture of total decadence. A moral rot had set in. The proud Jadav chiefs immersed in luxury were not at all bothered about the well-being of the common men. Greed and envy bred more thirst for enjoyment. The people were terror-stricken. There was in – fighting between clans – the Yadavs, the Vrishnis, the Bhojs, the Satvats and all the rest. This spectacle of degeneration pained Krishna. He had been striving all his life for bringing about a new awakening but it seemed that he had failed to defeat the forces of evil. Kamsa, Sisupal,

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Duryodhan and Karna had left their prototypes. The earth was yet to see the last of them. From his childhood Krishna had seen evil and injustice till they assumed such proportions that a bloody battle had to be fought to purge the earth of all evil. It was precisely for this that he had been supporting the Pandavs. He wanted a synthesis of the four varnas, an undivided Bharata where people would live in peace and equality. Would it remain a dream for ever? There were so many questions — but the answers eluded him.

The forces of sin he had been fighting constantly had seeped into his very home. With own relations turning hostile what was he to do now? What was all this struggle worth if he had to admit defeat in his own home front? His heart grew heavy. Like the golden Lanka the Yadu clan was on its way to extinction. This was in their fate.

Yet he had done his utmost to save his own people from the misrule of Kamsa. He had re-established the Yadav republic bringing back the democratic norms. And now his life's work lay in ruins. The iron will and determination which was evident then had faded — the entire clan was engaged in a civil war. Once he was inspired to work for the making of a new Bharata where everybody would be united by love and he had obtained a measure of success. But now all the happiness in having achieved his end was lost in seeing the undoing of his own people. Nothing made sense any more. His heart was torn with despair. Fatigued and exhausted, he sank deeper and deeper into indifference.

He looked out of the window, to the dark night outside. He couldn't make out anything in the dark yet he continued to stare.

Scenes of the battle seemed to flit across his mind — terrible scenes of death, of heart-rending cries of the mourning women. Their sobs seemed to find an echo in his own mind. He was torn by conflict. What was the use after all? What did he gain by this war? Did he really get what he had wanted? Was this the ideal state he had been striving for? Tremors went through his body as he contemplated the outcome.

Meanwhile Rukmini had entered the room. She came to him and placed her hands on her husband's shoulder. But Krishna did not feel her presence even when she played with his locks. Tears came to Rukmini's eyes. She was not used to such treatment and could not help feeling hurt, Krishna had many loves, so naturally he did not know what it felt to be neglected. He was indeed a strange

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character. Women fell for him, suffered for him. He derived a great deal of pleasure from inflicting sorrow on others. Yet Rukmini, with a woman's instinct could guess what was going on in her husband's mind. She called him softly, "Is anything the matter my dear? You are sitting lost in thought—I am sure you are disturbed about something. Would you not let me share your thoughts?"

Krishna looked at her and smiled, "It is so good to hear your kind words". He said, "I have no secrets from you. You know that."

Rukmini was a bit taken aback. Then she said sadly, "The mistrust of the relatives must have hurt you. They are suspicious of you, they speak ill of you; But you must not take their stupid remarks to heart."

"Alas, my dear! They are no longer in my control. Wealth and power have gone into their heads. They dislike my suggestions and regard it as interference. I have even given away half my kingdom, yet they mistrust me. Yes, it does hurt me."

Rukmini had never seen her husband react in this manner, "But you don't give up so easily. You have always regarded hurdles as nothing and helped people in distress."

"That is true my dear. But to-day I feel totally fagged out. The sight of my dream being shattered by my very own people is something I can't bear. It is too much for me." His dark face grew darker.

"But you must not lose heart."

"I'm sorry, Rukmini but I don't see any ray of light anywhere. The evil forces do not give in easily like Kamsa. They rise again and again. I have spared no pains but in vain. The malicious laughter of Jarasandha and Kamsa is still ringing—and I am shocked to find its echoes amidst my own people. Flabbergasted, I ask myself why did I work so hard, putting my own life at stake. I am filled with remorse—what was the use after all—I keep asking myself. What has been the net result of all my effort? Can this be looked upon as victory? This suicidal end? I am sick and tired Rukmini, sick and tired. Old age is upon me, I have become a doddering and feeble old man."

Unable to bear it any longer Rukmini pleaded, "Punish them, my lord. Don't spare them because they are related to you. They deserve to be punished."

She was interrupted, "You are wrong my queen. The forces of

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evil will always remain – the earth can never be free of sin. No man is able to do it. Only time can, time is a cruel arbiter of destiny."

"You disappoint me, my lord. My dreams have also been shattered. What should I live for?"

"I am sorry, but I can't help it. I am terribly tired and I don't see the end of the road. Somehow I feel that the struggle is beyond us, beyond mortal men. What is the use of creating another devastation like Kurukshetra. How long would the people of Bharata mourn the dead. Life must go on. I have made my decision. I'm stepping out of politics. Let destiny come forward and take over, and punish the guilty."

Suddenly the passage of time seemed to come to a stand-still. Between epochs history pauses for a breath. As Krishna stopped speaking leaving Rukmini still like a painted picture that moment seemed to have come. Time stood still, but at any moment its winged chariot would be drawing near. Krishna waited with bated breath, but apparently he wore a serene look, silent as the great Himalayan range, deep in meditation. All his worries seemed to come to an end as he resigned himself to his fate.

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The present democratic republic of India is the vision of Krishna translated into reality. Various independent states have come together under a central government for the sake of security and for the greater good of the masses. The quality and special qualities of each constituent unit is respected, there is no interference by one state in the internal affairs of another. A feeling of amity and friendship is maintained. This was the framework conceived by Krishna.

In spite of it the same drama of intrigue is being enacted. The stream of historical events is taking a parallel course. The attitudes have changed very little since the time of the Mahabharata. Inside the country the same faction-ridden politics is raising its ugly head, the same petty rivalry and conflict. We have the prototypes of Kamsa, Jarasandha, Sisupal, Duryodhan, Duhsasan and Sakuni still very active. In a wider sphere the world is dominated by the boastful autocrats – there is exploitation and injustice. So many women are being humiliated like Draupadi. The likes of Sakuni are thinking up nefarious schemes. The super power craze has become a bane just as it was during the time of Jarasandha. The big powers are flexing

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their muscles and keeping the smaller powers on their toes. Tension is on the increase and another battle like Kurukshetra is becoming inevitable. The present-day Duryodhans brandish their weapons in the belief that display of power leads to the ultimate solution — No wonder the world is headed for war and unhappiness.

In the final analysis the present day bears a close resemblance to the time of the Mahabharata.

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